

# SPOT

HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY • SPRING 1996 • \$5



Heidi Kumao

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**TINA MODOTTI • MARTINA LOPEZ**  
**ART GUYS • ALAN RATH**  
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**SPOT**

**SPRING 1996**

**VOLUME XV**

**NUMBER 1**

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SPOT is published triannually by Houston Center for Photography; subscriptions are \$15 per year in the United States. SPOT is a journal of independent opinions published by HCP as one of its many services to the photographic community. The ideas expressed do not represent positions of HCP's administration or membership, and are solely the opinions of the writers themselves.

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Houston Center for Photography is a non-profit organization that serves the photographic community as a resource for educational exchange through exhibitions, publications, workshops, fellowships, and outreach programs.

SPOT is sponsored in part by grants from National Endowment for the Arts, Texas Commission on the Arts, and Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County.

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**INTERVIEWS**

**4 Preserving a Man, Fixing A Shadow: The Book Jacket Portraits of Paul Monette**

Gay Block interviewed the author Paul Monette shortly before his death on the subject of the evolution of his book jacket portraits and how they often mirrored concurrent life changes he was experiencing.

**10 Interview with Andres Serrano**

David L. Jacobs talks with the photographer about his sources of inspiration and the evolution of his work.

**EXHIBITIONS**

**8 Just Between Guys**

The well known artistic duo of Jack Massing and Michael Galbreath celebrated twelve years of collaboration with a retrospective at the Contemporary Arts Museum in 1995. William R. Thompson examines their use of photography as a documentary tool.

**12 Imagined Nostalgia in a Gothic Arcadia**

The digital photography of Martina Lopez focuses on the issues of family and ancestry. K. Johnson Bowles reviews Lopez's recent show at the Art Institute of Chicago.

**13 Social Production and Curves of Beauty: The Photographs of Tina Modotti**

The recent Museum of Fine Arts, Houston show of Modotti's work seeks to separate the drama of the photographer's life from her images. Robert D'Attilio reviews the show in the Philadelphia Museum of Art installation and analyzes the role of politics in Modotti's art while dismantling many of the misconceptions about her.

**16 Deconstructing the City**

"Citta Aperta/Open City" Luciano Rigolini's 1995 exhibition of architectural photography is reviewed by Ed Osowski. Rigolini challenges the viewer to look beyond his monumental works to the larger issues of "seeing."

**17 Metamorphoses: Photography in the Electronic Age**

Eric Davis reviews the group show at the Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, that highlighted the work of photographers at the forefront of digital imagery.

**19 Causa Sui: On Bill Thomas' Works Entitled Suicide**

Past HCP Fellowship recipient Bill Thomas constructs complex tableaux dealing with a serious subject in often lighthearted ways. Fernando Castro reflects on Thomas' subject matter and possible motivations.

**20 A Grave Disease**

Fannie Tapper's recent exhibition at the UT Houston Health Science Center focused on her husband's battle with illness while prodding viewers to ponder larger questions of existence. Jennifer Elkins considers the work of this past HCP Fellowship recipient.

**21 When Art and Science Collide**

Alan Rath's multimedia pieces meld creative and practical applications while soaring past categorizations as "novel." His recent show at CAM is reviewed by Peter Harvey.

**FILM**

**22 The Trouble with Kids**

Larry Clark's film *Kids* professes an honest portrayal of youth today. Michael G. DeVoll delves into possible answers for the misconceptions the film inadvertently brings out.

**BOOKS**

**23 Bystander: A History of Street Photography**

Street photography is often characterized as a loosely aligned school of photography. Dick Dougherty reviews this recent book and reveals the thought behind the movement.

**24 One Life—Several Landscapes: An Appreciation of Robert Adams**

A generation of photographers have sought and found inspiration in the landscapes of the Northwest that Adams has lovingly captured. In his essay on four of the photographer's books, Peter Brown shares his feelings about this artist.

**27 Parting Shot**

Earlie Hudnall by Margaret Culbertson

**COVER:** Heidi Kumao, *Remote*, 1993. Mixed media: paper screen, record player, motor, film, lens, mirror, record, light, velvet.

**Editor's Note**

Welcome to all FotoFest '96 visitors and photographers. This SPOT combines fall and spring issues to present an enhanced offering of reviews, interviews and essays.

One of the most visible aspects of our lives within our control is how we choose to present ourselves to others. The manifestation of this is strikingly apparent in the manipulation of image undergone by those who must frequently display themselves to a larger audience, most often by photographs. In these instances, the sitter has the opportunity with each photo session to reconstruct the tableaux of his personal life for the public. The control and evolution of the image of a man is the subject of this issue's interview with Paul Monette by Gay Block. The subject of book jacket portraits of award-winning author Paul Monette was inspired by Ed Osowski who edited the interview.

An Interview with Andres Serrano by David L. Jacobs, in conjunction with the recent Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston retrospective, discusses the photographer's career progression since the political right thrust him and his controversial photography into the limelight.

*Social Production and Curves of Beauty: The Photographs of Tina Modotti* by Robert D'Attilio probes how the underlying mixture of art and politics combined to produce an artistic personality that arguably overshadowed the body of work Modotti produced in her relatively short photographic career.

Among the books reviewed in this issue are four books by Robert Adams. In *One Life—Several Landscapes: An Appreciation of Robert Adams*, Peter Brown reflects on what the work of this seminal photographer has meant to him and an entire generation of photographers that have found inspiration in Adam's work.

Karen Gillen Allen

**ABOUT THE COVER**

**Heidi Kumao: Hidden Mechanisms at HCP March 1 - 31, 1996**

"Hidden Mechanisms" is an installation of kinetic works, commissioned by Houston Center for Photography, that fuses projected photographic images, 19th century cinematographic technology, sculptural assemblage and sound elements. This project is presented in conjunction with FotoFest '96, the sixth international festival of photography. The opening reception is planned for Friday, March 1 from 5 to 8 pm. A gallery talk by the artist and critic Lynn Love will be held on March 2 at 1pm. HCP will produce an illustrated exhibition brochure featuring an essay by Lynn Love, and plans to travel the exhibition to other venues.

"Hidden Mechanisms" consists of "cinema machines," each one inhabiting a separate, darkened room. These zoetrope-like devices interact, their images overlapping and implying a dialog as they silently converse through gestures. Shadows of moving forms are projected onto paper screens, objects and walls. Like a memory that cannot be repressed, each animated gesture repeats endlessly and mechanically as it recalls charged encounters from the workplace, family or school.

As a child of a cross-cultural marriage, Kumao's past work has considered the dynamics of the "American" family from a different angle. Through this new commission project, the artist continues to explore human behavior patterns, specifically those adopted in response to a power imbalance or a personal relationship.

Kumao received an MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1991. Her installations have been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including the major traveling exhibition "Motion and Document—Sequence and Time: Eadweard Muybridge and Contemporary American Photography", organized by The Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts. She has received many fellowships, including grants from Art Matters, Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation and National Endowment for the Arts.

This project is supported through Houston Center for Photography by a grant from the Museum Program of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Texas Commission on the Arts. Additional support for "Hidden Mechanisms" is provided to the artist through a research fellowship in art at the University of Michigan. Artists' Projects, New York State Regional Initiative, a program designed to assist emerging artists in the creation of new work, also provided support.



# PRESERVING A MAN, FIXING A SHADOW

## Gay Block

At the time of his death in February 1995, at the age of fifty, Paul Monette was the author of more than a dozen books, wide in range, from carefully-wrought poetry and sharp, insightful essays, to popular fiction and novelizations of several screenplays. The works for which he is best known, however, are the two autobiographical memoirs, *Borrowed Time* and *Becoming a Man*.

As Monette matured as a writer and as his subject matter came closer to echo his own life—the life of a gay man living in the time of AIDS—the photographs that appeared on his books shifted and changed to reflect his growing awareness of who he was and how he wanted his photographed image to express certain values that he held. The look of these various portraits is quite wide-ranging; nearly every book includes a different image.

Several years ago the photographer Gay Block and the writer Malka Drucker met Monette and his companion Winston Wilde at an exhibition at Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco. From that meeting developed a friendship that included visits to Monette's house in Los Angeles and a trip to Italy. From that friendship also emerged the portrait by Block that appears on the jacket of Monette's collection of essays *Last Watch of the Night*.

In a note to the book *Fifty Texas Artists* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1986), for which she photographed the artists represented, Block wrote that the intention was to "make pictures that would record my subjects' physical beings and also, through physiognomy, relay some impression of their inner selves." This certainly is what her portrait of Monette accomplishes. It is an image that speaks of wisdom and experience, of sadness and pain, and of the knowledge that comes from both experience and study. It is also an image that shows fully the emotional depth of Block's friendship with Monette.

The following interview was suggested when I noticed how Monette's



Gay Block, Paul Monette from *The Last Watch of the Night*, 1993

image changed from one book to another and how these changing images carried with them echoes of Renaissance *vanitas* portraits. It was conducted by Gay Block at Paul Monette's West Hollywood home. Some editing has been done to eliminate personal references that do not bear on the central topic of the interview. —Ed Osowski

Paul Monette: It's beyond ironic that we're doing this when I am feeling so disfigured, so unphotographable. I think that the photographs that you took of me in February [for *Last Watch of the Night*] are sort of the last that I want to look at. And I'm sure I have a larger case of "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity," than I usually do in life. I am highly aware of how orchestrated the process always was, and how much input I always took in it.

There are, after all, many authors who just have a breezy picture taken, or don't want a picture at all. I really was possessed with the notion of becoming a kind of Shelleyan poet figure. And then, as soon as I "came out," and I started to work on gay work, it was terribly important that I look good, that I look sexy.

After I came out, I knew exactly what I was going to show. I spent the first twenty years of my life thinking

of myself as deeply pudgy and unattractive—"bodyless"—which is the word I used so often in *Becoming a Man*. I guess it was an attempt to freeze a moment in which my "bodylessness" would not be the most important thing. I would conquer that feeling of "bodylessness" by presenting a good picture. I might have been able to psychoanalyze some of that even at the time.

Gay Block: The self-image stuff, you mean, in terms of your past?

PM: The poems in this first book, *The Carpenter at the Asylum*, are just riddled with self-hatred, confusion and unhappiness. And the picture isn't, because I wanted to present the glamorous, young, suffering poet. Can you see that there is a rose at the top of that picture? That's a silk rose that the girlfriend I was living with at the time brought back from Paris for me. And that is such a studied pose. I am actually sitting at my desk in Cambridge, and I have happy memories of that.

I was only teaching half-time. I had moved from Milton where the school was, to Cambridge, and spent two years living right near Harvard Square, and feeling that sense of excitement and bohemian authenticity. I guess I think of that as my real education. I barely noticed my Yale education, and my Andover education. Whereas those two years in Cambridge, going to poetry readings three and four times a week, and going to literary parties all the time. Everything was about books and poems; it was a wonderful, wonderful time in my life.

GB: Do you remember Miles West, giving him some instruction of some kind?

PM: Yeah, he was a friend who actually worked at Little Brown, and he used that as a pseudonym. Because he designed the book as well, and he didn't want his name [Jeffrey Griswold] put on the photograph as the designer's name.

Jeffrey has since died of AIDS, but he was very willing for me to set it up and get it exactly the way I wanted it.

GB: And you told him you wanted to look successful?

PM: I wanted to look—Byronic, or Shelleyan, or Keatsian—I wanted to be the young romantic poet. He understood that right away. It was years later that I talked to Richard Avedon about how [Marlene] Dietrich had controlled the photograph he took of her. And how he just let it happen because she seemed to be very, very tuned into what she wanted to look like.

I mean, I've done a lot of thinking in my life about how

any of us as subjects of photographs control the process, whether that's good or bad. I don't feel that Native American sense of "you steal my soul" when you take a picture of me. I don't feel that way. I guess I just feel a longing to orchestrate.

GB: Let me talk to you just a minute, because we are doing this together. I've had a few portraits made of myself, too. And when we talked last night, you said, "I've been doing some thinking about this."

Today, I'm on my way over here, and I thought: "thinking"—it's almost something I don't do. I shouldn't say that. I do think now. But the things that I do don't come out of a thought process.

PM: And thinking is anathema, maybe to you.

GB: That's right. So, I've had people make portraits of me, and have done a few self-portraits, never thinking that I was going to look beautiful or sexy, but instead, wanting to look—as a person with depth—as a person who has had a life that has not been—all easy, nice, fine. Wanting to say—Just because you know this or that, you don't know me. Here is who I am. There is depth, there is pain, there is stuff behind here that I want you to see. I think, that's where I've been with images I've had made of myself.

When I came to take your picture for *Last Watch of the Night*, I thought, OK, I've had some success as a portrait photographer. I've had a show at MoMA. I know how to do portraits. But still every time I do a portrait, I'm nervous. Am I really going to do something here? And I walked in and Winston was in his t-shirt, and was getting ready to leave and do his workout at the gym. And I'm thinking, Oh, I would really love to have Winston somehow in the picture. I love his arms, and his pecs, and his t-shirt.

But I didn't say anything. I was shy about it, and this is not unusual. I won't say what I want. And we sit here and talk. Then Winston says, "OK, I'm going to work-out now." And he comes and kisses you goodbye, and finally I say, to myself, Gay, open your mouth, are you crazy?

Miles West, Paul Monette from *The Carpenter at the Asylum*, 1971







Star Black, Paul Monette, 1989

"Winston, would you please stay for a few minutes?" [Laughter] And of course, it was fine.

And I really love that picture particularly. But I also really like the one of his kissing you—just what happens, happens. You talk about the glamorous snap, sure that picture will be, as you called it, the last one that you might want to look at. We'll hope that's not so.

PM: We'll hope that's not so. And also, that one, definitely, not just to me, but to many people, is full of exactly what you mean, depth and experience, and maybe even wisdom.

GB: That's what I wanted—the depth of you, and with Winston in it. The fact that none of us is alone, and that is our backdrop, our background, our strength. So, it was very wonderful for me to be here to take that picture.

PM: And what do you think of a picture like this [the author's photo with the silk rose]? He's so young, he's so young!

GB: Oh, but it's lovely—and it's got a lot of those clues. No, I can tell this is not "you." It's sort of like the raised eyebrows—there is a sense of working at it, of "this is how I wanted to look." I can tell that there's a pose going on here.

PM: Because the irony is you can't take that pose and enter the world with it. I mean, you would be stiff, you'd look like a clown. One is fluid, much more fluid than that. That always struck me as one of the danger waters of photographs, especially of me as a tubby teenager. And I'd look at these pictures, and [think] Oh my God! Look how many pimples I have!

[Editor's Note: The discussion turns to his jacket portrait in *Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll*]

This photograph horrified my parents. It became part and parcel of their reading this novel, *Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll*, and saying, "You've destroyed your life. You'll never get a job, because you've 'come out' as gay, and we're going to have to sell our house and leave town."

And I said, "Well, it's a comic novel, and you'll just have to deal with it." And my mother said, "And this picture!" Now, that picture—it was

less composed by way of the details of one's eyebrows. I wanted to show an attitude of being a young, gay man in an urban context.



Steve Hamby, Paul Monette from *Borrowed Time*, 1988

And Roger Horwitz, [Paul's partner who died of AIDS in 1986] took the photograph. And that shows me standing against a wall of the esplanade next to the Charles [River in Cambridge], which is where I spent really most of my time, and where our apartment faced. And Roger kept saying [comic voice:] "Smile!" And I said, "No, no, no, I think I want brooding here." So, I think, that's why I ended up brooding rather than smiling. And there, I guess, I'm about 28 or 29. In other words, the first photograph [with the silk rose] shows me composing myself out of fictions, and not willing to admit that I'm gay. The second photograph [against the stone railing] may have me composing in the same way, but it's very much about being gay, and having that freedom. Thus, it's not surprising that it's outdoors, rather than indoors, that it's in thrown-on clothes. And there ain't no silk roses in that picture.

GB: This is like, *This is who I am, it's who I want [to be.] And of course, you are handsome. You're thin.*

PM: So thin, I know—a long-time-ago-thin. I don't like being thin any more. But the chubby child had, in fact, headed East. [Smiles]

GB: Which is your favorite [author] picture of all your books?

PM: Besides yours, my favorite picture, I guess is the picture of me and Roger on [the cover of] *Love Alone*, because it's so accidental and so unposed and so—nearly lost.

GB: Is it the one in Italy?

PM: Yeah, right. In Tuscany. Yeah. I didn't find the roll of film until several months after Roger died—a month after he died. And I went and had it done and suddenly there were these pictures from this monastery, including the one that the Brother had taken of the two of us. And certainly that would be the opposite of this composing a face for the faces one meets. It captures some tenderness and togetherness and joy that couldn't be composed.

GB: This is *The Gold Diggers*. What year is this?

PM: I think '79. That's by my friend, Star [Black.] She took probably three or four of the pictures that are

GB: So, you were trying to look slightly tough here? Why?

PM: I guess, because my new project in life was to conquer Hollywood, and to see if I could write about Hollywood the way Proust wrote about Paris, to give you the most painful embarrassment about it. One likes to think that one is accurate in thinking that Hannah Arendt never worried whether she combed her hair for her picture or not—she didn't care what the cover looked like. Maybe she did. But one feels that she is so devoted to the body of the text, and to the primacy of the text, that there is no room for glamming it up or pretending it's something else.

GB: That's so interesting how this is a late '70s picture. More than the last one—*Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll*? The first one is a mid-'70s picture. It's like Roger's picture is more timeless, it feels to me.

PM: Maybe that's because of an attempt to create an image with this one, and the first one. The [author's] image on [*Taking Care of*] Mrs. Carroll was just a little more natural, a little more real. And it's interesting to me that the second edition of *The Gold Diggers* is a much more natural picture as well. That was taken by Star in Taos, about a month and a half after Roger died. We went to New Mexico where I wrote my big poem about Lawrence. And it was a very cold, snowy day, the opposite of Southern California.

Roger had died in October, and she [Star Black], came out to spend Christmas with me, and convinced me to go to New Mexico with her. And it was the first time I thought about going some place without Roger, or that we'd never been. And we stayed in Albuquerque for a night at her aunt's and then went to Santa Fe. But I was very eager to get to Taos and see the Lawrence grave. So, that [author photo] actually was taken in the plaza in Taos on a bright, bright snowy day. Gorgeous, gorgeous weather. Again, she took many, many pictures that day of me wearing that black-and-white wool thing. Partly the reason it didn't feel terribly posed was the exhilaration



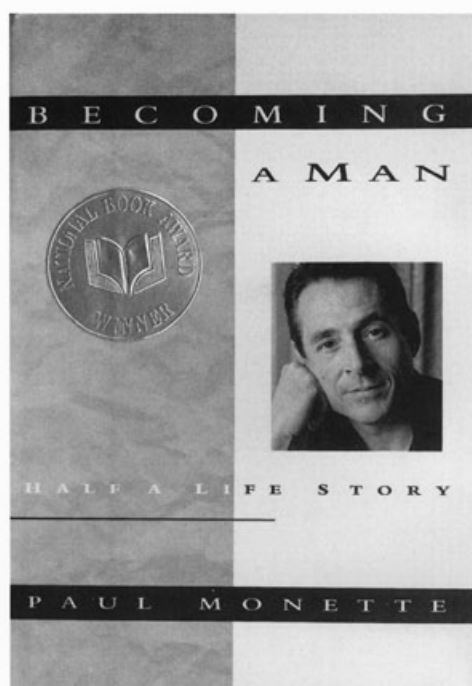
Star Black, Paul Monette from *Afterlife*, 1989

GB: But you could control it in the choice, is that [right]? [Author's photo of *The Gold Diggers*.]

PM: I think it looks slightly retarded, trying to look slightly tough.

of the cold weather and all—it didn't give you the chance to be languid or too self-conscious.

GB: If you had written this piece instead of our doing it in this form [videotape], what do you think would have been your overall theme?



T.L. Litt, cover photo from *Becoming a Man*, 1991

PM: Well, I think it would have been—what is that marvelous phrase of Fox Talbot's about capturing a shadow or catching a shadow?

GB: Fixing a shadow.

PM: Fixing a shadow. Right. Try to see what happened outside me, and outside the time that has gone by. What was the shadow that was fixed? Whatever I wanted it to be. What came through? I don't think, for instance, that my grief [at Roger's death] comes through that photograph on the second edition of *The Gold Diggers*, but my closed-offness does.

GB: Yes, I think that's right. The grief being too much.

PM: It's important to note that I then went for five years, basically, unpublished. I did a couple more novelizations, and fortunately had some good connections to be able to keep my income going. But it was not until Roger died—I mean, I turned in outlines, and chapters and all kinds of things, but I was *persona non grata* in publishing—between 1981 and 1985 or 6. So, it's really with the AIDS work [*Love Alone* and *Borrowed Time*] that the [author's] pictures begin again.

GB: I guess I hadn't remembered that *Love Alone* came out before *Borrowed Time*.

PM: Yeah, just a few months after it—March, '88.

GB: So, this is taken in the monastery.

PM: Yes, at Monte Oliveto in Tuscany. And the last poem, "A Brother of the Mount of Olives" is about finding that photograph, and being at that monastery, and what it means. And still, when I give a reading where I want to do a few things from the past, I always use the last forty lines or so of that poem, because it so sweetly puts together the passion of our love and the kind of eternity of our love, against the ugliness of the Church.

GB: There is also an author photograph on the flap of this, again taken by Star.

PM:—surely the most unlikely author photograph imaginable for that book, [*Love Alone*].

GB: This big smile.

PM: Big smile and wearing a sexy shirt. Michael Denehy, when I sent him some proofs to look at, zeroed in on this one immediately. I said, "Well, it's actual. I was there that day, and this was a picture she took." "I said, "Doesn't it seem a little incongruous for this book?" And Michael said, "Well, it's different from the congruity of the picture we're using

on the front [with Roger]. But what's wrong with showing you alive?" And I thought that was actually pretty sensitive.

GB: It is, I think, incongruous for the poems, though. Obviously, pain is a part of life. So, the poems are just painful. Maybe it is a book about your having survived. You are a survivor. There's a picture on the front and a picture on the back, and then what's in the middle is what happened in the middle. So, alive again, an after the fact comment about this picture on the back. [author's photo for *Love Alone*.] What made you choose it?

PM: I went with Michael who said, "What's wrong with doing something sexy?" I said, "There's nothing. Go ahead. Go ahead. Go ahead." And probably not an accident given the significance of a natural photograph, that's what we went with on *Borrowed Time* as well.

GB: When is this picture from?

PM: I think that picture would have been taken sometime around November, 1984, a few months before Roger got sick—taken by a client of Roger's and somewhat friend of ours, Steve Hamby. He had a Christmas party which we went to, and he had photographs of all his friends as their Christmas present, and that was ours. And we were both delighted by it. And by Christmas, Roger really wasn't well. AIDS just overtook our lives at that point.

GB: So with this Steve Hamby picture, it was just obviously appropriate to have Roger's picture on *Borrowed Time*. And you weren't necessarily needing to be conscious of your image.

PM: It's a wonderful picture of Roger and a less wonderful picture of me, but I didn't care. Because it was hard to capture his wonderfulness.

GB: Yes, but you're very boyish looking in that. How old were you there?

PM: Oh, I was surely thirty-eight or so.

GB: How about other author's pictures that you have seen? Is there anything about author's pictures that you have thinking about?

PM: I often think they're terribly self-conscious and self-indulgent at the same time. And I'm also very aware because there are different kinds. Author's pictures from the world of best sellers are much more nakedly commercial. I'll give you an example...often with authors, you get that musty picture of them in their study with books all around them. Of course, I don't know what the history of author's photographs is.

GB: What is your relationship, or association with Avedon?

PM: I've come to really rather like him as a photographer, especially in his *New Yorker* incarnation. I resisted the "slop-over" from his fashion photographs to his more serious political and personal photographs. I didn't somehow see how they went together. I had equal problems with Irving Penn, frankly, and in a way with Robert Mapplethorpe also. It seems to me there was a kind of composure that was at odds with another sort of thing they were doing. I don't feel that way about any of them any more.

It was useful for me to see that book of Diane Arbus's commercial work. Obviously, what appeals to me is the other.

GB: If you could have had anyone photograph you—even if we say in 1978, in 1982—whatever years they may have been throughout time, living, dead—portrait photographers. We're dealing now with just photographers, portrait artists. Who might you have chosen?

PM: Oh, a couple of things come to mind. Certainly Steichen comes to mind—because I just think they are such exquisite portraits, the ones he did for *Vanity Fair*, not the Hollywood ones. And if I really wanted to do a good romantic picture of myself, I could do worse than someone like Julia Margaret Cameron. But I would not be afraid in these days of my life to be photographed by a Diane Arbus. Because I think what moves me about her work is how terribly human it is, and how terribly unexploitative it is.

I wouldn't mind seeing what Avedon would say about me. It's so fascinating to see him on people like Oliver Stone. I also think I've probably grown in appreciation of him. And I think he's probably grown as a figure of photography. Who else would I choose?

GB: Mapplethorpe?

PM: I wouldn't be against it. No, I was trying to think would I want to choose somebody like Dorothea Lange or Walker Evans—people who I worship. But they are not actually portrait-

takers. I mean, they take wonderful pictures of people. But I don't think of those great Southwest photographs of Dorothea Lange as really portraits. I mean they are—like Greek tragedy or something. It's so much more than the individual—such heightened reality.

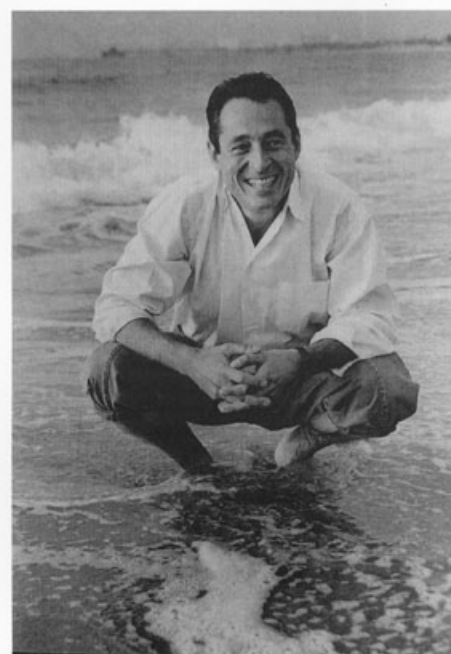
GB: Back to the pictures on your later books. Afterlife. What year?

PM: '89, '90.

GB: —by Star again. What do you think about this one? There is a pole in the middle of it off to the side.

PM: I was very excited about the political intensity of this novel, and for some reason I wanted to show myself as very energetic and on top of the world. I think that's what we tried to capture, because the cover picture, which we fought for for a year, does the contemplative side so beautifully. I feel good about it. You talk about the survivorship of that picture in *Love Alone*. This is very much a survivorship picture, too. Because the book is about survivorship, it's about three widowers, who have each lost their lover to AIDS.

A lot of it has to do with how comfortable I am with Star, and how seamless, in a way, we are as photog-



Tom Bianchi, interior photo from *Halfway Home*, 1991

rapher and subject. I think that's the last picture she took of me.

GB: Yes, you really do look comfortable with her in this picture—almost as if you're smiling at the photographer. It's almost like we're there at a moment. It feels like a moment, less internal than it is shared.

PM: Very open, somehow, unlike that thing of me crossing my arms in Taos.

GB: The older we get the more of life there is to live, isn't there?

PM: Yeah, and bid good-bye to—

GB: *Halfway Home*. Look at that! This is by Tom Bianchi, art directed on the slant on the back flap. And who is he?



PM: You can say I was looking at him, because that's exactly true. He's a photographer who has done three or four books of erotic male photography, not very much to my taste, but he's very skillful. And there are some wonderful pictures. Michael Denehy, who publishes him, put us together. Oh, they picked a wonderful picture.

**GB: So, is *Halfway Home* the last book before *Becoming a Man*?**

PM: Right. And *Halfway Home* is a happy book about being in love. And one of the reasons I'm terribly proud of it, and I was very glad that that picture showed me happy and being in love.

**GB: [Shows small b&w head-shot of PM on cover of *Becoming a Man* with fist on cheek.] Everyone knows this picture on the cover.**

PM: It's by a woman photographer named Tracy Litt, who's a lesbian photographer. I think it's the first picture she's ever had published outside a gay rag. Her pictures, I think, are quite wonderful. I just happen to really like this picture that she took. I sent Harcourt Brace after it, and she was just thrilled.

**GB: Yeah, It really is such a wonderful picture, and it's how we became friends. Because this book had just come out when we saw you at the Frankel Gallery, and Malka recognized you because of that picture.**

PM: Tracy lives in New York. They actually chose another photograph from that group for my book of poems, which just came out.

**GB: What was the context of this sitting? Because that's the same shirt I photographed you in.**

PM: They actually were taken during a publicity tour, and I was getting my picture taken quite a lot, yet I was so comfortable with myself at that time. Winston and I were together on the *Becoming a Man* tour in the spring of '92, which was when this happened. And I felt more free, in myself, in my gayness, than I ever had, partly because I had told the story of it. I felt triumphant in talking about it. I had a real message I wanted to deliver to people, about how not to go that way in life, but to go with openness.

Those pictures capture what really the rest of the year kept showing. There was a seamlessness between my joy as an "out" person and my communication of it. I am much less concerned with how I look, in myself, anyway.

And there is percolating in me a level of altruism towards others, and I suppose, a conscious attempt to take the role of role model. Somehow, all of those factors are part of what these pictures show. I mean, it's not an accident that they are the pictures from *Becoming a Man*, and that that book tells my story as cleanly as I could.

And I also have a sense that if someone were following me around with a camera, the way my documentarians have been doing for the last couple of years, that any snap of me taken off videotape would look like this during that year of *Becoming a Man*. It was really a time of great triumph for me.

**GB: Were you sick here? Were you well? This was before '92, then?**

PM: '91. Yeah, because I was diagnosed [with AIDS] in December of '92? [asks Winston] I don't think so.

**GB: You've been diagnosed for less than two years?**

PM: No, I'm coming up on three years in December. That diagnosis happened, and the reaction to that drug that almost killed me happened six weeks after the National Book Award, and three weeks after the *Today Show*, right?... New Year's '91 is when I was diagnosed.

**GB: So, other people photographed you, but did you not see the pictures, or you just didn't like them as well as this?**

PM: Oh, it's funny, because I even thought we might want to use that picture for the poems, but I think they decided it might tip the seriousness of it, or something. I'm glad they went with what they did. They did a beautiful job on the book.

**GB: We have to deal with—Last Watch of the Night, the only book we have left.**

PM: I was a little afraid of how this photo would affect me because as soon as I saw it, I knew it was right. But I also knew—the first thing I thought was—I'm sick. And quite quickly, I began to understand that there was depth, and experience, and even a kind of wisdom in the directness of it, and in the honesty of it. It's hard in a way for me to separate my pleasure at the rightness of it from my pleasure at the rightness of the choice of Greek sculpture on the cover. They both seem set in stone in a way.

If there is any significant theme in *Last Watch of the Night*, it is that even in the midst of dying, one must

live. The necessity of examining one's life is only more acute in the Aristotelian sense. And the command on the Temple at Delphi, "Know thyself," went with me from beginning to end of this book. I think what makes me proudest of the photograph is that it's a picture of someone who knows himself.

Most of the seven months since you took that picture, I've been quite ill. And I don't much like the way I know myself anymore. So, in a way, this is something to hold on to, because I can't seem to write with the same kind of acuity—and I can't seem to get past all of my symptoms.

Greek tragedy includes tragic knowledge. I prefer a kind of more grasped-for knowledge of consciousness, in a way. There is so little in my consciousness these days that has any joy or any sense of discovery. I mean, obviously, enduring is a full-time job. I don't know where this dovetails with putting oneself out as a writer both in an author photograph or in a book, versus a sense of being paralyzed to know how to put myself out these days. I've said to Winston that I have to be better than this. I cannot go on like this, because it is just twenty-four hours of misery and self-consciousness. All fight and no life. One struggles to preserve some kind of essential self, especially if you're me, especially if you've spent so much time examining the self.

When I went in the hospital and broke those three bones in my spine, and picked up an infection from the hospital which they couldn't cure for three and a half months—a coccus infection. I mean, really the whole year before this [GB's photo] I was in very good shape, right? [To Winston] Remember that picture we took for the visas into Russia? I look like I'm a dead body. I don't even look alive.

**GB: But the self, regardless of how it might be physically pictured, the self is very strong...It's almost as if the portraits mirror your life struggle. This is the life-and-death struggle that you're living through, but this other was the life struggle.**

PM: There is something so poignant in a way about every one of these photographs, because of how little the subject understands what's going to be—three years down the line, or ten years down the line. It's like all those pictures in the tower in the Holocaust Museum from that one town in Lithuania. Thousands of pictures of people who just don't know what's about to happen. We never do.

**GB: You know, you can paint a portrait obviously after death, after you know it all, but a photograph, you only know what's happened up to then.**

PM: You know that wonderful picture by Duane Michaels of the man and woman on the bed sitting, and what's written underneath it is, "We were happy then. We were so happy." You could see it. I love that picture. And clearly, they're not now—much has happened.

I've had more of it in place than most people do—in terms of the anchors: of my relationship, and my house, and my doggies, and my work. I mean there is something to fight for. I think so terribly back on my friends who died of AIDS, who never really found love in life. Really life in a way missed them and they knew it. And the struggle just became quickly absurd.

**GB: I have a friend in Houston whose 30-year-old son was just killed in an automobile accident. He didn't have to struggle with death—it was instantaneous. But with him I had this sense of completion that none of us know how long life is supposed to be. And when you talk about how your life has been full, and some of these friends' lives who died of AIDS did not have what they should have had. But they could have lived to eighty—**

PM: —and still not had it. I'm so glad I had a chance to live in my forties all these years, because it's so different and so wonderful. And there is so much more self available to one. And that's why it pains me when people have to die at twenty-six and thirty-one. They didn't even have a clue how very much life can matter.

I remember this old French lady told me once. She said, "I hope you get to be as successful as you want to be, and you are a wonderful writer. But I promise you, if you get to be fifty, or fifty-five, you're going to spend most of your time in the past." And she may have been saying this more about herself than about me. But she's right. You spend an awful lot of time in the past, trying not to be sad, trying just to be there.

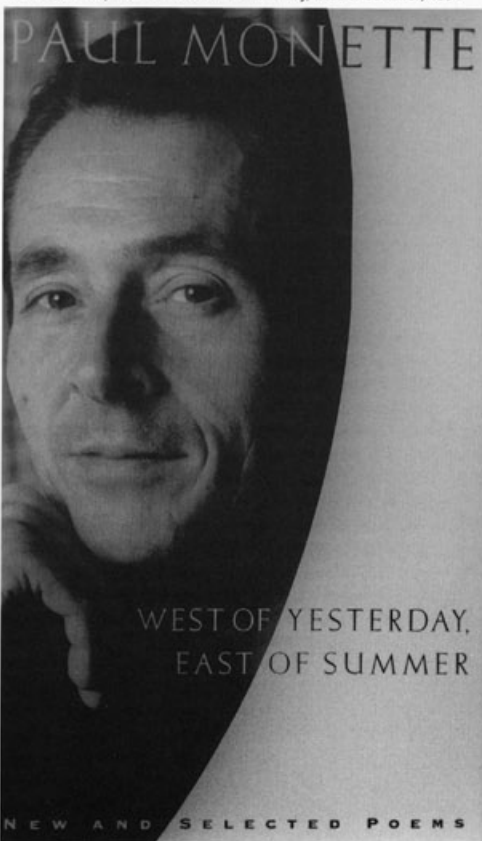
I always say about Oedipus, if the Oracle at Delphi told you or the Sphinx told you you're going to kill your father and marry your mother, you ought to be very careful who you kill and who you marry. And he's not. He kills the king, because he gets pissed off at him on the road, because he's filling up the road. And he goes to Thebes and he marries this woman whom he doesn't know. Greek tragedy is not about people who are cautious because of what they know about love and life.

[PM walks out the door of the room.] OK, I think I should lie down for a half hour. I have all this medical stuff to do.

**GB: I think you should, too. I want to kiss you good-bye—for today...**

Gay Block is an internationally exhibited photographer and a recipient of National Endowment for the Arts grants. Her book, *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust*, 1992 with writer Malka Drucker coincided with the opening of *Rescuers* at MoMA.

T.L. Litt, cover photo from *West of Yesterday, East of Summer*, 1994





# JUST Between GUYS

**The Art Guys Think Twice at the Contemporary Arts Museum, April 8-June 25, 1995**

William R. Thompson

On October 18, 1963 Julian Wasser photographed Marcel Duchamp playing a game of chess with a nude woman inside a gallery of the Pasadena Art Museum. A memorable footnote in the history of contemporary art, Wasser's photograph also serves as a vivid reminder of photography's historical importance to performance and conceptual art. For years, many artists whose work was temporary or ephemeral in nature often turned to photography and video as a means of recording their actions. Others, such as Duchamp, staged events and performances exclusively for the camera or took advantage of the device's unique ability to capture a fleeting moment and manipulate one's perception of it. Many of these documentary images—sometimes the only surviving evidence of a finished conceptual piece or performance—have since become valued as art objects in their own right, challenging traditional definitions of art and further blurring the distinction between concept and finished product. Given its significance to the work of conceptual and performance artists, it is hardly surprising that photography has also been essential to the art of Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth—the collaborative pair of post-modernists better known to Houston audiences as the Art Guys. Their frequent use of the camera as both a documentary tool and expressive device was evident throughout "The Art Guys: Think Twice," a retrospective featuring more than eighty works and twelve years of their creative efforts held at the Contemporary Arts Museum this past summer.

Although the Art Guys did not begin their working partnership until adulthood, their unique artistic philosophy—a combination of adolescent enthusiasm, appreciation for the accidental, and infatuation with mass consumerism—is rooted in the homogeneous traditions of middle class America in which both men were raised. By coincidence or providence, Massing and Galbreth shared several common experiences while growing up; they each came from families with five children and were raised in white, middle class homes. In addition, they almost have the same birthday; Massing was born on January 4, 1959 in Buffalo, New York, whereas Galbreth was born on January 6, 1956 in Philadelphia. Following their similar, yet largely inconspicuous upbringings, the two men eventually made their separate ways to Houston and in the spring of 1982 met at the University of Houston's Lawndale Art and Performance Center. In 1983, Massing and Galbreth first performed *The Art Guys Agree on Painting*, a now famous stunt in which they dipped their right hands into buckets of paint and then shook hands over a piece of

paper; the action produced a "drip painting" reminiscent of the work of Jackson Pollock, but more important, the seeds for a whimsical and dynamic collaboration were sown. In the following year, Galbreth earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from UH, and Massing, following the advice of sculptor James Surls, completed his undergraduate work there. Since then the two men have abandoned their respective identities as independent artists and worked together under the anonymous rubric of the Art Guys. As curator Lynn Herbert suggested in the exhibition catalogue, however, their collaboration may have predated their initial meeting by more than twenty years. On each of their respective



Michael Galbreth, age 4, birthday snapshot, January 6, 1960, Asheville, North Carolina

birthdays in 1960—just 48 hours apart—the parents of Massing and Galbreth photographed their sons wearing holsters and toy guns. "For any other two adults, such a discovery would be dismissed as mere happenstance. The Art Guys, however, elect to ponder the possibility of these photographs representing the first 'Art Guys' work," Herbert wrote. While playing cowboy was a typical custom for middle class boys in 1960s America, the two photographs of Massing and Galbreth wielding phallic toy pistols foreshadowed their collaborative explorations of other boyish customs and perhaps even their decision to dwell in Texas, the stereotypical heart of the gun-toting Old West.

That the Art Guys would consider two old family snapshots as evidence of their first project reveals just how much they esteem the accidental and ephemeral aspects of making art. Indeed, a number of the works included in "Think Twice" were made from photographs resembling amateur snapshots taken by the artists or witnesses to their performances. Although in the case of performance art, the action is usually considered the finished work, Massing and Galbreth have sometimes exhibited their documentary photographs along with the physical remains of past performances in order to create new works of art. In *Product Test #1: Suitcase Drag, Houston to San Antonio, Highway 90A, 234.7 Miles*, 1987, for example, the Art Guys attached a red suitcase to the bumper of a pick-up truck and

dragged it on the road in order to test, not unlike obsessive consumer product inspectors, its durability. Originally intended for an exhibition at the Blue Star Art Space in San Antonio, the scarred suitcase was installed in "Think Twice" alongside a commemorative brass plaque and a Type C print showing the performance in progress.

Photography has not only proven to be an effective method of documenting such projects, but has enabled the Art Guys to envision, through such

Jack Massing, age 1, birthday snapshot, January 4, 1960, Tonawanda, N.Y.



techniques as collage and montage, proposals that were difficult or impossible to carry out. In *Suitcase Tower Maquette*, 1995, another example of their fascination with luggage, the Art Guys created a miniature scale model of a circular tower composed entirely of suitcases. Although a life-size version has not been constructed, the exhibition catalogue proved to be the ideal venue for reproducing a clever photographic montage showing Massing and Galbreth trapped in the

placed their proposed proboscis in a more serious art historical context by juxtaposing their sketches to images cut from magazines showing a venerated presidential nose from Mount Rushmore and a medieval bust missing its nose. Unlike the Art Guys' imagined *Suitcase Tower*, this project was realized for the exhibition in *The Big Sneeze*, 1995, an enormous wall-mounted nose which periodically erupted, as the title implied, and spewed forth green snot into a catch basin on the floor. The work was an appropriate testament to the Art Guys' technical ingenuity as well as to their childish attraction to disgusting things. Yes, in the world of the Art Guys even boogers can be art.

The ability of the camera to record a specific moment in time proved useful in *Bulk Up for CAM*, 1994-95, a year-long project combining photography, body art, and performance. In this work the Art Guys embarked on an ambitious regimen of dieting and exercise to strengthen and tone their bodies. Before beginning their workout routines, however, Massing and Galbreth were photographed separately in poses emphasizing the apparent flabbiness of their bodies. In these two small gelatin silver prints the artists stood before the camera wearing only jeans and old sneakers; the lighting cleverly highlighted their hunched shoulders, soft abdomens, droopy eyelids, and messy hair. In short, both looked like they could barely get out of bed that morning, much less lift a dumbbell. These images were juxtaposed next to two monumental photographs of Massing and Galbreth taken following a year of regular exercise. In these images the Art Guys, clad only in Spandex shorts, grin with satisfaction as they show off their bulging biceps and sculpted pecs. The year of exercise not only improved their bodies but apparently sharpened their minds as well—gone were the dimwitted facial expressions and unkempt appearances of their former selves. The juxtaposition of these two sets of photographs on the museum wall parodied the countless "before and after" images from advertisements showing satisfied individuals espousing the benefits of various

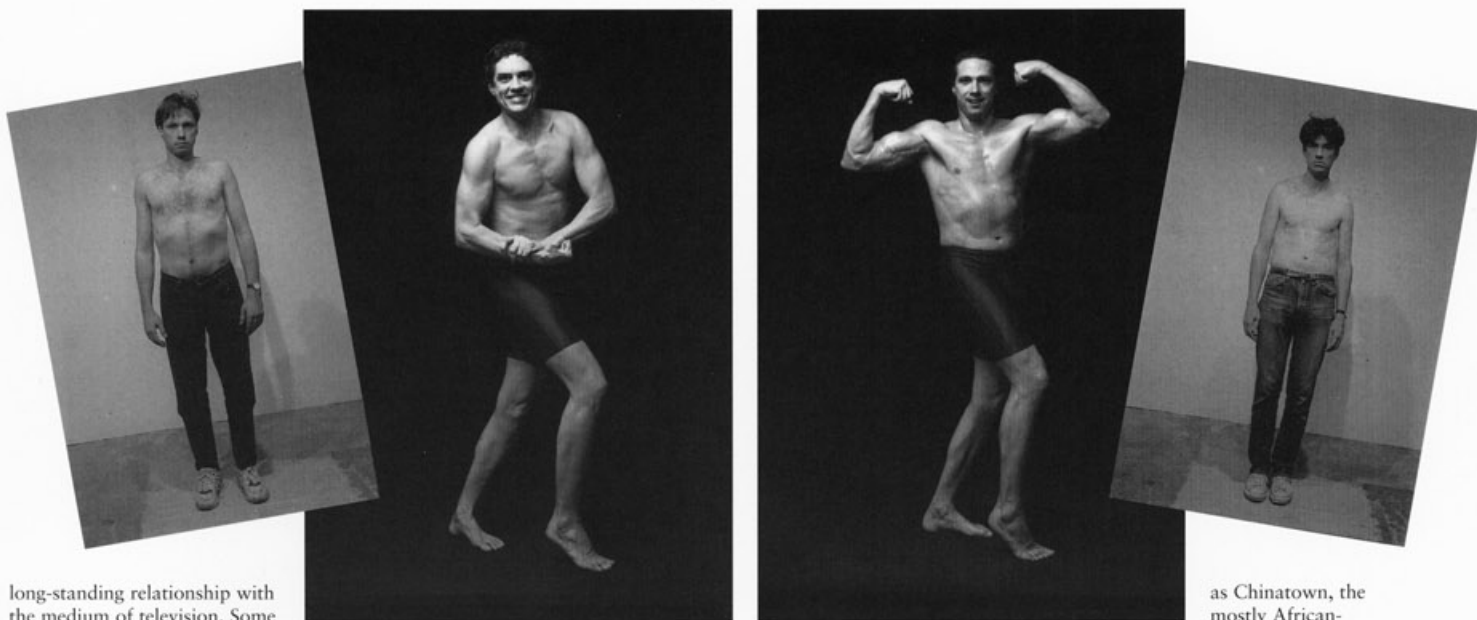


The Art Guys, *Suitcase Drag* (from Houston to San Antonio), 1987

center of the tower maquette. In another outlandish proposal titled *The Big Sneeze* from *101 of the World's Greatest Sculpture Proposals*, 1991, the Art Guys made use of appropriated photographic images glued to the surface of a drawing outlining their plan for the construction of a monumental mechanical nose. Although the project was intended to be funny, they

miracle diets, pills, creams, and exercise machines. As with many of the Art Guys' projects, however, *Bulk Up for CAM* was also rooted in the artists' culturally ascribed gender roles; it both reflected and perpetuated masculine obsession with physical prowess and big muscles.

Not unlike many of their fellow males the Art Guys have also had a



The Art Guys, *Bulk Up for CAM*, before and after photographs of a twelve-month body-conditioning project preparing for the survey exhibition at CAM, culminating in an unveiling performance at LaBare, a ladies club in Houston, 1994-95

long-standing relationship with the medium of television. Some of their projects, such as *Lambchops for the Motor City*, 1987-88, have utilized video as a means of recording and repackaging past performances. *Video Jukebox*, an interactive display created for the exhibition, enabled visitors to sample from a menu of more than a dozen short videos including musical compositions, documentary clips of past events and performances, and even television commercials. In *Music for BB's*, 1983, the earliest video in the jukebox, Massing and Galbreth dropped BB pellets through a glass funnel in order to record, à la John Cage, the musical possibilities of non-musical objects. Interestingly not all of the videos in the jukebox were actually produced by Massing and Galbreth. In *Dining at Denny's: Food for Thought*, 1988, an excerpt from a broadcast of television Channel 13's program *Good Morning Houston*, local reporters bantered about the Art Guys' latest stunt—sitting in a Denny's restaurant for twenty-four hours in order to commemorate the winter solstice—and ironically, pondered whether or not such an act was indeed art. It is a question that Massing and Galbreth deliberately provoked in these and other works.

While the camera is obviously an integral component of the Art Guys' oeuvre, it does not dominate their creative output. The Art Guys have never favored one particular medium over another, but instead have dabbled in virtually everything from painting to whittling. Hierarchical distinctions between different tools, materials, concepts, and approaches simply do not apply to their work—they have been immutably democratic in terms of their creative methodologies and ever-willing to try new things. From time to time they have reached into their seemingly bottomless bag of tricks in order to explore innovative approaches to such established and frequently used techniques as appropriation. Since appropriation, by definition, involves taking something improperly or without permission, the Art Guys apparently could not resist crossing the fine line separating artistic appropriation and outright theft. Not satisfied with merely appropriating images of works of art, the Art Guys have gone so far as to make additions to existing works of art by other artists and to incorporate entire works into their own creations. In *Gorilla Art*, 1995, for example, Massing and Galbreth temporarily attached two monkey topiaries to the palm tree in Mel Chin's monumental sculpture

*Manilla Palm*, 1978, installed on the west lawn of the CAM. In a more daring act, the Art Guys stole a small Michael Tracy sculpture from their Dallas-based art dealer Barry Whistler, enclosed it within a glass vitrine, and labeled it *Appropriation #7, Barry Whistler 12/3/91, 8:35am*, 1991-94. Incorporated into an Art Guys assemblage, the Tracy sculpture lost its autonomy as an individual work of art; fetishized within its glass case, it was reduced to the level of the stolen athletic sock comprising *Appropriation #1, Ed Wilson 6/9/91, 6:45pm*, 1991-94. In these works the Art Guys combined a natural sense of puerile mischief with a Duchampian interest in the meaning and aesthetics of common and unusual objects.

The *Appropriations* series also included a variety of other small objects claimed to have been taken from different movers and shakers in the Houston art scene: a Neuberger Museum pin from former CAM director Suzanne Delehanty, a coffee mug from current Museum of Fine Arts director Peter Marzio, and a miniature cello belonging to former Diverseworks director Caroline Huber and her husband Menil Collection curator Walter Hopps. Displaying stolen objects in a security conscious museum, particularly when several of the objects once belonged to prominent museum professionals, was an act not lacking in irony. The stolen knick-knacks not only questioned why our culture values an object which has been placed on a pedestal and defined as "art," but also addressed the problematic issue of cultural theft and museum complicity. Whether it is an Impressionist masterpiece confiscated from Nazi Germany or a humble coffee mug appropriated for a work of art, how does one define and enforce the ownership of stolen property? Better yet, what is the role of the museum in the debate—victim or perpetrator? Along this vein, the Art Guys continued to poke fun at the serious business of museum security in *On Guard*, 1995, a project involving the "appropriation" of members of the

CAM staff. Depending on the day of the week, visitors to the exhibition would see museum guards singing, wearing silly hats, or carrying plastic ray guns. It was clear from this project as well as the giant mechanical googly eyes mounted on the exterior of the building that the Art Guys enjoyed remaking the museum's stuffy image into one more sympathetic to their world view.

Although "Think Twice" showcased the work of the Art Guys in a very privileged space—an elite art museum—some of the performances which coincided with the exhibition involved activities and locations with more democratic appeal. In one such performance titled *Blow Through Town*, 1995, Massing and Galbreth walked through the streets of Houston while using leaf blowers to blow leaves and refuse from one neighborhood to the next. The Art Guys began their odyssey at the corner of Lawndale and Dismuke—the site where they first met in 1982—and continued to walk several miles to the "Art Guys World Headquarters," their current studio in the Heights section of Houston. In between these two locations, Massing and Galbreth walked through such neighborhoods

as Chinatown, the mostly African-American Fourth Ward, and the outskirts of posh, overwhelming-

ly white River Oaks. Although these communities are isolated from one another because of racial, economic, and social barriers, the Art Guys drew attention to their close physical proximity and conceptually linked them through the act of blowing debris from one block to the next. By using leaf blowers, the Art Guys further collapsed racial stereotypes by placing themselves in the role often associated with Mexican-American laborers who are seen everyday in Houston wielding the devices while tending the yards of affluent residents. Like many of the Art Guys' projects, however, *Blow Through Town* also followed in the footsteps of other conceptual artists—particularly Joseph Beuys, Richard Long, and Dennis Oppenheim—who have also practiced walking as a method of making art.

Although "art" and "guys" are two words that do not always mix, Massing and Galbreth seem to have discovered the formula for successfully integrating their jobs as artists with their social roles as men. The unique duality of their collaboration has enabled them to accomplish together what few other artists have been able to do alone. Their work is conceptually rich and sophisticated enough to satisfy the most jaded theoreticians, yet it is firmly rooted in the populist traditions of middle class America. Throughout their oeuvre the Art Guys have paid homage to Duchamp, Fluxus, Cage, and Klein, but equally as important, they have found rich meaning in such everyday cultural effluence as baseball, Coca-Cola, and Camel cigarettes. In short, virtually anyone can find meaning in their work. The Art Guys may indeed celebrate immaturity, the unconventional, and consumer excess, but like devout post-modernists, they do so in order to question canonical standards and doctrines. Despite their sophomoric antics and slapstick sense of humor—or better yet, because of them—the Art Guys have made some very serious art.

William R. Thompson is the Curatorial Assistant for Twentieth Century Art and Textiles and Costume at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

The Art Guys, *Blow Through Town*, 1995







Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*, 1987, original in color

## INTERVIEW WITH ANDRES SERRANO

SEPTEMBER 28, 1995

David L. Jacobs

*Editor's Note: This interview was conducted in conjunction with the Contemporary Arts Museum retrospective "Andres Serrano: Works 1983 - 1993," September 30 - November 26, 1995.*

**DLJ:** *We should start with Piss Christ, since it's the cause celebre. Obviously the picture has brought you a lot of notoriety. How has it affected your career, both positively and negatively?*

Serrano: Well, it put me in a much greater arena as an artist. I attract an audience that sometimes knows very little about art, but is curious to see my work because they have heard about it. I'm grateful for that. I never wanted to make work that would only appeal to one specific audience—especially an art audience. I prefer to get people from all walks of life and with all kinds of backgrounds to come to see the work. I get a very diverse audience. That's something very positive and real that's happened. And I have made tons of money because of the notoriety—which is fine—but it's not like living on Easy Street. At this point in my life I struggle—everything is a struggle. An artist never knows, no matter who he or she is, established or

not—you never know what kind of income you're gonna have. It's not fixed.

**DLJ:** *Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame—you never know when it's going to run out.*

Serrano: I never know from month to month what kind of income I'm going to draw. I'm in a very privileged position because I'm able to survive off my work, and that's a very fortunate thing. Many artists have to do something else in order to live. So, in that respect, the controversy has helped me a lot.

**DLJ:** *What about the down side? Other artists and photographers sometimes get identified with a few images or a signature style, and it's very difficult to break out into different kinds of approaches, genres, subjects. Has the fame of Piss Christ become a barrier?*

Serrano: Not for me or for the audience. Initially, people come because they've heard of *Piss Christ*. There's a lot of people who know of *Piss Christ* but they don't necessarily know my work, and when they come to a show like this they are able to see a greater range. I've never felt like a "one shot" artist, or locked into *Piss*

*Christ*. I've always maintained a distance from it. And the audience has reacted very strongly to the later works that have come after *Piss Christ* such as *The Klan*, *The Nomads*, and especially *The Morgue* series. I think that at this point my reputation for a lot of people is based not on *Piss Christ* but what has followed.

**DLJ:** *Does the ongoing controversy over Piss Christ surprise you, or the fact that ten years later it remains in the minds of people who want to eliminate the NEA?*

Serrano: You know, the controversy when it first broke out surprised and shocked me. But, after I saw the way things were going, I realized that the *Piss Christ* controversy was a circus which had nothing to do with me. It had a life of its own and which would go on even without my participation in it. So, initially I said, "Well, it's going away, it's going away." And then something would happen to bring it back again—Jesse Helms wouldn't let it go, especially during re-election time. Now, years later, Newt Gingrich is taking up Jesse's mantle. So, it is something that is not a part of my life at this point. When I hear *Piss Christ* being brought up again, I feel somewhat removed from it.

**DLJ:** *But, of course, it happened again in 1994, when the National Council rescinded a grant that was recommended by the NEA Peer Panel. Were you surprised last year too, or at this point were you expecting controversy?*

Serrano: I was surprised that the NEA panel recommended me, and not quite as surprised when the National Council voted to deny me the grant. There were lawyers from different organizations who wanted to pursue it. But the NEA has not been really an active part of my life, so, I didn't care to pursue it any further in the legal system.

**DLJ:** *What was the Council's rationale for the reversal?*

Serrano: It was a matter of quality.

**DLJ:** *Which work was presented?*

Serrano: The portraits. I really felt like a scapegoat because even though they denied it was for political reasons, I was sure if any other artist had submitted that work it would not have received the same sort of scrutiny. And the council was well aware that my work was going to come up beforehand, and they had gotten slides of work that had nothing to do with my original application to review when my name came up.

**DLJ:** *When going through your retrospective, I couldn't help wondering what all the fuss was about. The images don't seem especially tough.*

Serrano: In fact, my work is not all that tough. I wish it were tougher. A lot of times people come to see the shows and they wonder what all the fuss is about.

**DLJ:** *Maybe if Piss Christ was a painting, rendered in acrylics...*

Serrano: Yeah, if *Piss Christ* were a painting, and if *Piss Christ* had not been titled *Piss Christ*.

**DLJ:** *Maybe Gatorade Christ. To what degree do these issues revolve around the representational status of the photographic image? The fact that there was a real thing being photographed?*

Serrano: Absolutely. A real thing—even when it's an absolute lie. Even when it's subtly fabricated—like when I do it or Joel-Peter Witkin or Cindy Sherman—it seems real to the audience. It's hard not to respond in a more visceral way than you would with a painting.

**DLJ:** *The photographs are beautiful on a formal level. But isn't there a problem with what Sontag called "The Beauty Treatment" when it is applied to the grotesque or the appalling? I think, for example, of the photograph of the My Lai Massacre that appeared on the cover of Life magazine: in 1968 a beautiful colored photograph, elegantly composed of mangled bodies. Given the subject matter, do some of your photographs risk being overly aestheticized? Do the formal elements diminish the subject matter, the content?*

Serrano: No, they're not overly aestheticized. It amazes me that people call me such a perfectionist when it comes to lighting and that my technique is so aestheticized—in reality my lights are very, very simple. It's not like I went into *The Morgue*, it's not like I took these people from the morgue and took them into a fancy, super-duper studio with \$50,000 lights like Annie Leibowitz.

**DLJ:** *Well, you don't need fancy lighting for them to be aestheticized.*

Serrano: They're not fashion shots, they're not beauty shots—they're art, and I try to light it well and I try to do a good job. They're not over aestheticized at all. It's just that some people feel uncomfortable because they're not the sort of morgue shots that you would see in a book of forensic pathology or the My Lai picture or Eddie Adams' shot of the execution. That's one approach to death, and there are others. Mine is one of many.

**DLJ:** *Your approach tends heavily toward the abstract, both in the formal sense, and in that you've abstracted parts from larger wholes. Burnt to Death III is a tightly selected slice (pardon the expression) from the whole. The effect, at least to my eyes, is one of abstraction that verges on aestheticization of the subject.*

Serrano: [Look, I don't know what you expect.] In the morgue series, I initially was photographing people from a greater distance so that you could see, if not the entire body then three-quarters or half the body. Then I started to zero in on my subjects, realizing that sometimes you could tell more about the whole from a detail. I did with *The Morgue* what I often do with a lot of my subjects: monumentalize them, make them bigger than life, even more than in *The Klan* images.

I'm also looking at composition. I'm looking for abstraction and representation in my composition. Yes, you





Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Infectious Pneumonia)*, 1992, original in color

can get so close up to someone that the image becomes very abstracted, such as the inside of the man's rib cage in *Burnt to Death III* where it's only red. The organs have been cleaned away and if you look at it, it's a lot of red, it's like little objects floating in space almost. It's a very abstract image until you know what it is.

**DLJ:** Right. And I couldn't know what this image was unless you explained it to me.

Serrano: You know, I did some images like that—super close ups of organs and body parts—but when I did the show, I decided to do them more representationally. I chose to go the other route—to be able to not only inform the audience, but to be able to hit the audience over the head with what they were looking at...

**DLJ:** I would have no idea what this image was if you had not just explained it to me. But, people walking into the exhibit don't have you sitting there explaining it for them. What are they to make of this?

Native Americans... So, that's why most of the images in *The Morgue* are not like *Burnt to Death III*. This is very atypical. In most of them it is very easy to establish what they are. For me, this is an abstract image. Abstraction is one of the tools of, if not photography, certainly painting and art, and I have always referred to myself as an artist rather than a photographer. So, besides my interest in representation, I have also always been interested in abstraction. So this piece for me may function purely as abstraction.

**DLJ:** Is that true of much of your work?

Serrano: To an extent.

**DLJ:** The same dynamic is at work in an image like this as *Death by Drowning 2*. I'm very drawn to this image because of the ambiguity in it—it becomes so many different things to me.

Serrano: Not only that—a lot of times, people don't know what they're looking at, not because they're igno-

rant but because the camera lies. If I were to ask you, you would probably say this was a black man. This was not a black man. This was a white man who drowned. And, as a result of being in the water for several days, his skin started to turn black and purple and green and blue. But, that sort of information is not in the photograph. I have to tell you. But, it's not important. You can appreciate it as a human being, black or white.

**DLJ:** American culture is such a bizarre conglomerate of taboos and violence: the old dance of eros and thanatos. You get in big trouble if you do a *Piss Christ* or if you try to represent sexuality on a television screen, and yet the most egregious forms of violence are routinely seen in the media.

Serrano: I just find that this society is a lot more prudish about things like sex and death than Europe. I found that my work has been appreciated in Europe and seen in a different light than here. All you have to do is watch TV and you see naked women, you see breasts, you see a greater acceptance of the body than in the States. I have had many shows of *The Morgue* in France, Italy, and most recently in Scotland, in Montreal. And yet, "The Morgue" has been seen in its entirety only once in the U.S., at the Paula Cooper Gallery, and now we have a few pictures in this retrospective.

**DLJ:** I confess to having problems with *The Nomads* series, the portraits of the homeless, because they decontextualize the subject, much like Irving Penn did in *Worlds in a Small Room* and Avedon in *In the American West*. They both set their subjects up against neutral backgrounds in portable studios and shot them as if for the pages of *Vogue*. Why do you adopt something like this strategy in *The Nomad* images?

Serrano: Everyone has probably gone into a studio at one time or another and had their picture taken. That series was inspired by Edward Curtis, who had a traveling studio in his covered wagon, and who photographed these people because he wanted to document what he called a vanishing race. The Penn and Avedon work I know, and I like it. The only difference is that since Penn did his work we've seen many fashion photographs where women were placed alongside native tribes and native peoples, and I think if you were to do that with the homeless it would be seen as very insensitive.

**DLJ:** Why is that?

Serrano: If you were to take homeless people and use them as backdrop material and put beautiful white women, dressed in luscious outfits for *Vogue* magazine, that would be insensitive. Penn's photographs have evolved into that. What Avedon did was quite good, but he was photographing mostly white Americans, lower to middle class—working class, sometimes lower. I simply wanted to give a face and a name to the invisible poor—the people we see every day on the way to the subway,

in the streets, that we really don't see—that we have to, for whatever reason, block out. And, so, like I said before—everyone else has their picture taken in the studio at one time or another, so why can't the homeless be seen in that context, too? And, ultimately, the real aim was to do what I felt were portraits that did them justice. For me, isolating them in a studio-like context was the way that I wanted to go about doing it.

**DLJ:** You mentioned Curtis as an influence. From a historical point of view this is a troublesome influence, both because Curtis manipulated his subjects in some serious ways, and because what emerged was a romanticized mythology that anthropologists, historians and Native Americans have vigorously questioned.

Serrano: But, I don't think of Curtis as being an anthropologist, documentary photographer, or a photojournalist. He does the same thing Joel-Peter Witkin and Cindy Sherman do, the same thing I do. He's just a post modernist taking photographs, fabrications of Native Americans in costumes in a way that most photo artists do now. They just construct a new reality. I don't think of Curtis as a documentary photographer, I think of him as an artist. All I know is that when I was a kid growing up, the only images that I ever saw of Native Americans were on TV, and they were seen as savages that had to be completely exterminated for their own good and for the good of the White man. I infinitely prefer to embrace Curtis's vision rather than that one.

**DLJ:** But, isn't there an element of ethics that is problematic with what Curtis did with the Indians and perhaps what you are doing with some of your subjects? Issues of human appropriation, of using people toward questionable ends?

Serrano: No. That's the nature of photography—it's all manipulation. Even the photojournalist manipulates and controls what he photographs. And, in the end, it's what he or she edits.

**DLJ:** True, there are degrees of manipulation. But some photographers are more manipulative than others.

Serrano: Curtis made his sitters look good, and what's wrong with that?

**DLJ:** That's what you're doing with the homeless?

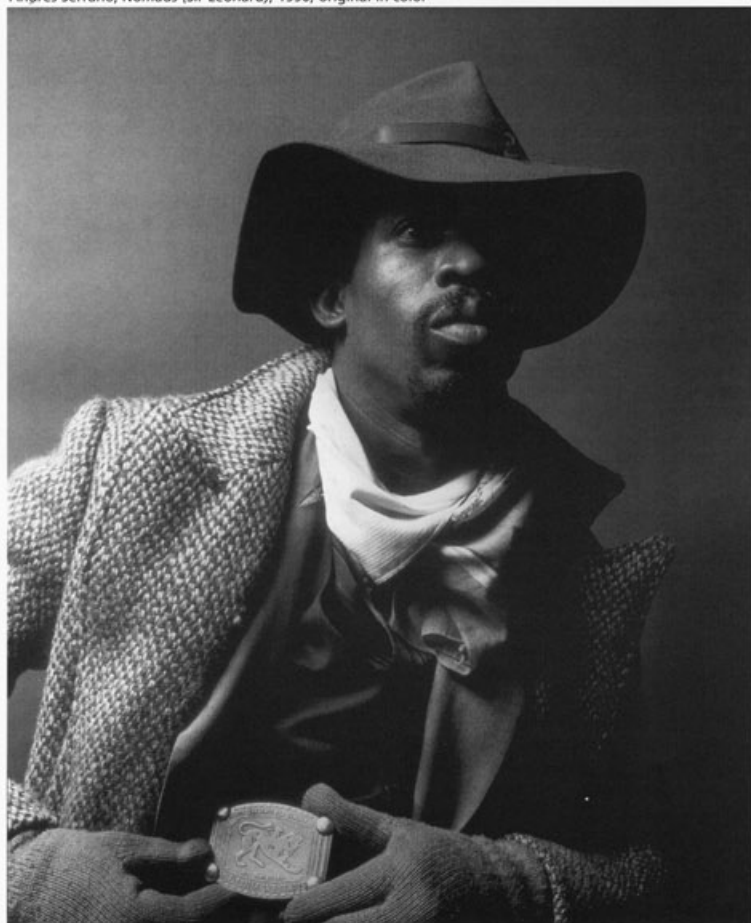
Serrano: Exactly.

**DLJ:** So, I come in off the street, kind of like I come in and look at some of *The Morgue* series, and what do you want me to get from those pictures of *The Nomads*.

Serrano: I would like for people to respond, hopefully in a positive way. But mostly, to just respond. That's always been my intent—to not only get the audience in there, but to get the audience to react. The reaction is entirely up to them...

David L. Jacobs is chair of the University of Houston Art Department. He co-curated "Ralph Eugene Meatyard: An American Visionary," and contributed to its catalog.

Andres Serrano, *Nomads (Sir Leonard)*, 1990, original in color



**Memory/Reference:**  
The Digital Photography of  
Martina Lopez, The Art  
Institute of Chicago, Sept. 16,  
1995-January 28, 1996

K. Johnson Bowles

*Editor's Note: Martina Lopez's exhibition "Generations of the Family" was shown in HCP's Gallery X in April/May, 1992. Her work is also represented in "Metamorphoses: Photography in the Electronic Age."*

Seven large-scale photographs by Martina Lopez fill the David C. and Sarajean Ruttenberg Gallery of The Art Institute of Chicago. The hues are striking, intense and somewhat discordant—sienna, sepia, green, blue, black, and white. A visitor in a nervous defensive voice blurts out, "the color juxtaposition bothers me." She may also be responding to the evocative and haunting images. Vast, layered landscapes that stretch beyond the imposing dark clouds on the horizon both forbidding and foreboding. Unknown ancestors wander aimlessly in desolate terrain and old cemeteries like the "un-dead" with self-absorbed stares and actions. Martina Lopez crafts densely layered images of the sublime and romantic, slightly surrealistic yet subtly jaded and folksy. The tableaux form an imagined nostalgia in a gothic arcadia where nineteenth century literature and landscape painting meet twentieth century surrealism and the suburban tourist.

Lopez has created digitally-assisted images since 1986. Spurred by the death of her father and perhaps the memories surfacing after the loss of a loved one, her first montages combined snapshots from family photo albums. Lopez wished to reconstruct images from her own memories. Since then she has broadened her sources to include photographic portraits of unidentified people from the turn-of-the-century collected from second-hand stores. For Lopez, the resulting works are "a way to create a collective history, one that would allow people to bring their own memories to my work." The scenes are far too anonymous and distant to recall an individual's specific memories but this is not where the intriguing and resonating aspects of her work lie.

One aspect of Lopez's "collective history" involves imagined nostalgia for the life of ancestors and a life at one with nature. In landscapes with few reminders of human impact, the figures seem to be lamenting and longing for a relationship with their surroundings. Lopez's figures are formally dressed—ready for rituals (weddings, parties, and the like) not in overalls, boots, aprons, and bonnets. Nature as religious renewal has long been a preoccupation with the post-industrial world especially in the United States. Even Thomas Jefferson's ideal of "agrarian life" ascribed the benefit of a closer relationship with God as a result of working the land.<sup>1</sup> However, in a recent *New York Times Magazine* article, "The Trouble with Wilderness," William Cronon contends "(we) pretend our real home is in the wilderness... Ever since the nineteenth century, celebrating wilderness has been an activity mainly for well-to-do city folks. Country people generally know far too much about working the land to regard unworked land as their

## IMAGINED NOSTALGIA IN A *Gothic Arcadia*



Martinez Lopez, *In View of the Heart*, 1, 1995, original in color

ideal."<sup>2</sup> Furthering this sense of imagined nostalgia is the time period Lopez's figures represent—late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For many people today these are not people we would have ever met as they appear in the images. The memory and nostalgia springs from seeing similar photographs not from being a participant in the time period. Cronon astutely explains this phenomenon of imagined nostalgia, "as we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own longing and desires."<sup>3</sup>

This imagined nostalgia is also heightened by other devices. Through her use of dark clouds, cemeteries and black-and-white images of people from another age, Lopez appropriately thrusts the viewer into a bathetic gothic novel in order to further stir emotions of sentimentality, pity and fear. She plays on fears of the unknown, the "un-dead," and the possible price paid in the afterlife for earthly sins. Have Lopez's landscapes been desolated by humans? Are the figures actually specters giving warning? Have souls been bartered? Art Institute Curator of Photography, Sylvia Wolf seems to concur, "All of her characters are on hold, suspended in a purgatory where desire is contained by starch and whale-bones and where romance is overshadowed by death."<sup>4</sup> With a combination of strangeness of images and a wonder that digital imagery and technology often evokes, Lopez's work produces a thrill not uncommon to tales of terror in the sensational gothic tradition. The work's sincerity as well as its gentle, refined tone thankfully saves it from any comparison to the B-movie renditions of these tales.

Additionally, Lopez's work is rooted in traditions of nineteenth century Romanticist painting. For Lopez's purposes Romanticism lends it self perfectly to the concepts of Arcadian landscape myth and imagined nostalgia. Visually she finds kindred spirits in nineteenth century landscape painting especially with *Cloister Graveyard, in the Snow*, c. 1817-19 by Caspar David Friedrich. Art historian Frederick Hartt's evaluation of the nineteenth century painter and his work could easily describe Lopez's work. He writes, "Friedrich was by inclination melancholy, even pessimistic, and his landscapes are always concerned with an immense and impersonal world, responsive to no

human emotion save sadness."<sup>5</sup> In Lopez's work only cemeteries have lush green flora and though figures are associated by proximity they do not interact. Many figures seem like lost souls as in *Promising the Past*, 1, 1995 where a woman in a distant graveyard seems to have stopped dead in her tracks, holds her hand to her chest and appears to look out into the distance dazed and alone. Again, the Arcadian landscape myth resurfaces. Making a connection with nature means making a connection with each other. Humans are of nature. The figure's gaze and gestures are concerned with personal lamentation and loss for others. Here there is a longing to know another, perhaps to know parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, friends. Thus a connection to the land is also a connection to ourselves and others.

Hartt states that Friedrich's sense of alienation and clarity of technique foreshadows Surrealism.<sup>6</sup> The past, even in art history, follows Lopez like a shadow. From the nineteenth century landscape painters such as Friedrich, to the photographic montages of Henry Peach Robinson (especially *Fading Away*, 1858) and paintings by surrealists Giorgio de Chirico and Salvador Dali to the photographs of Jerry Uelsmann there is long line of connections. Andy Grundberg and Kathleen Gauss's assessment of the importance of surrealism is particularly applicable to Lopez's work. "...Surrealism offered a means. This attack on the photographic veracity, then is not confined to the 1940s but extends through the 1950s, the 1960s, and even into the work of artists of the 1980s. While these photographers share no single style, common belief, or orientation, in one way or another the transcendence of photographic truth, and the pursuit of a symbolic or interpretative imagery, is key to all."<sup>7</sup>

Also relating to the surrealistic tone of Lopez's work and her desire to remain accessible is Naomi Rosenblum's explanation of the montage technique by avant garde artists in the early twentieth century. "The creation of a new visual entity from existing materials appealed to the avant-garde artists because it was a technique employed by naive persons to create pictures—a folkcraft, so-to-speak—and in part because it used mass-produced images and therefore did not carry the aura of an elitist activity."<sup>8</sup> Lopez not only utilizes this "folkcraft technique" of montage, but furthers

the notion of accessibility to the general public by making her images appear as if they were hand-colored and using family album photographs. Interestingly, collaging snapshots and photographic portraits and then applying color has been a popular hobby that many have enjoyed since the nineteenth century as evidenced by the works of Lady Filmer in the 1860s. In this sense it must be seen as purposeful for Lopez's work to sometimes appear to look "cut out." In *Promising the Past*, 2, 1995 the figure edges are more like outlines than contour lines. Images cut on contour lines would enable the disparate images to blend together more seamlessly as with the technique of Jerry Uelsmann.

Indeed accessible, Lopez's images also allude to tourist photographs. In presentation, the photographic prints float on a black background just about the size of a slide projected for the slide shows of the suburban tourist latest travels. The repetitive technique of figure in foreground and landscape in the background is reminiscent of the travel snapshot. Bizarrely enough the style, the monumentality of the figures with rigid gazes in black-and-white against a decoratively clouded blue sky in Lopez's *In View of the Heart*, 1, 1995 parallels painfully close postcard images of Mount Rushmore. It conjures up memories of the countless acquisitive photographs taken at the scenic lookout. The obvious formula of her images is purposeful and again points to the concept of the Arcadian myth and imagined nostalgia.

At first glance it might be easy for the casual viewer to angrily dismiss Lopez's work because "the color juxtaposition bothers me." Other viewers may even enjoy them with a smile for the thrill and sensationalism of her images and technique. There is comfort and escape in imagined nostalgia. Both responses offer truth and points of entry for further contemplation if the viewer is open to confronting the unknown and often little understood aspects of the nature of life and relationships. Lopez skillfully and cleverly weaves aspects of our "collective history" into images that are pensively quiet and mysterious yet also questions and make judgment about our "collective history" too. She accomplishes the task with experience, seriousness and skill and a bit of the kitsch and familiar.

### FOOTNOTES

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**Tina Modotti: Photographs at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, December 17, 1995 - February 25, 1996. Also at Philadelphia Museum of Art September 16 - November 26, 1995 and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, March 28 - June 2, 1996**

**Robert D'Attilio**

Art and politics swirled through the life of Tina Modotti in opposite directions. She started out as an actress and a photographer; but she ended in the domain of politics, a dedicated Communist and Soviet agent. During the short time that she worked within the field of photography (1923-1930), Modotti united these often quarrelsome forces to create an exceptional body of work that has never been quite fully appreciated, that is always been in danger of being overshadowed by the spectacular drama of her life.

As the 100th year of her birth approaches, The Philadelphia Museum, under the guest curatorship of Sarah Lowe, has mounted a major retrospective of Modotti's photographs. Containing more than one-half of Modotti's total output, it is by far the most comprehensive exhibit of her work that has ever been assembled and presents a long overdue opportunity to see the full range of Modotti's work.

Modotti, long considered in America as a minor and exotic addendum to the history of photography, has sprung up from her semi-obscure to become a captivating figure. As little as ten years ago, scarcely any accurate information was available about Modotti, but since then we have been overwhelmed with a mainstream, multi-lingual flood of publications dealing with her life and work: five biographies, two novels (one bestseller), more than a half-dozen exhibition catalogs and conference proceedings, countless magazine and newspaper articles appearing in English, German, Italian, Spanish.<sup>1</sup> Much of this attention was at the expense of her actual work in photography. Modotti became, in Lowe's paradoxical phrase, 'the best known unknown photographer.' This exhibit will help to counterbalance the drama of her life with the weight of her work.

#### I. SOCIAL DOCUMENTS

Some cynical scholar once said that we look at the past not with our eyes but with our prejudices. It wouldn't surprise him that Modotti's work has been plagued by a powerful double whammy; the prejudices of the art world and the prejudices of politics.

Modotti's photographs first found their way into significant photographic collections, MoMA and George Eastman House, because of personal associations. The prints came as gifts from Edward Weston and his family (Modotti, as is well known, had been his model, mistress, apprentice, colleague, friend); the curator, in each instance, was Beaumont Newhall, Weston's great friend and admirer. As a result the vague sense emerged within the photographic community that Modotti was a derivative photo-

grapher, admitted because of whom she knew and not on the basis of her own vision. This led for some time to an under valuation of and condescension toward her work.

Modotti's own politics further complicated matters. Her work, aided by her influential connections to the cultural left, was originally accepted with enthusiasm in America. She received notice in leading cultural journals; she was the first photographer to appear on the cover of the politically radical *New Masses*; and she participated in several influential photo exhibitions.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, the depth and seriousness of her involvement as a militant communist turned her into an awkward figure to deal with in the United States (She had been a leading figure in such anti-American organizations as *Manos fuera de Nicaragua* and *Liga antiimperialista de las Americas*.)

Dee Kapp told Sara Lowe that in the late 1940s, while working in the photography department of MoMA, Dee Kapp told Sarah Lowe that she abandoned her research on Modotti after being warned that the political content of the work would draw unwelcome attention in the current anti-communist climate. Moreover according to Kapp, the fear of McCarthyism became so pervasive

that when twenty-eight Modotti prints (of the thirty-four that MoMA has) were handed to the front desk furtively and anonymously in the late 1950s in order to avoid problems and accessioned only six years later.<sup>3</sup>

Modotti's controversial politics caused most American photographic critics and curators to push the subject clumsily aside. Many times they were usually quite inept in considering the reality of her politics; the general slipshod sense being that Modotti's politics somehow interfered with her 'artistry.' But, to impose art history alone upon Modotti's photography leads to evident distortions; important historical and social aspects are carelessly dismissed or considered insignificant. Conspicuous examples can be easily found in major photographic sources.

John Szarkowski in his influential *Looking at Photographs* (he picked one of Modotti's stairs images to be included in his choice of 100 significant photographs from the MoMA collection) could banter about Modotti in aimless fashion:

"Most of Tina Modotti's work that is known to the photography world was done in Mexico in the years 1923 through 1926 when she lived and worked with Edward Weston.

She apparently continued to work after 1926, at least until 1930, when she was deported for Communist activity...

Although it is doubtless (or probably) irrelevant to the issue at hand, Modotti was surely one of the most fascinating women of her time, even without reference to her talent as an artist. She was...a sometime revolutionary (by design or by circumstance, or both)...Kenneth Rexroth identified her as a Kollantai type, and was terrified..."

The curators of the major traveling exhibition, "Cubism and American Photography, 1910-1930 (1981/82) were prescient enough to include her work, but in their catalog they condescended to Modotti with the political correctness of a different generation:

"She was a bright, hard-working student, although her work was often derivative of her teacher's (i.e. Weston)...Modotti who became a Communist after Weston left Mexico, was arguably closer to the everyday life of the country... Modotti's photographic style weakened after Weston's departure and her turn toward radical politics."<sup>4</sup>

The Italian writer Maria Caronia read a political motive into the ending of the legend of Tina and Edward,

casting Weston as a neurotic aesthete, who had detoured Modotti from finding her way as a political artist and communist militant: "Weston—above all with his visceral American anti-communism that slowly created an insurmountable barrier in his relations with Tina—" Weston as a proto-MacCarthyite lover is just a bit far-fetched.

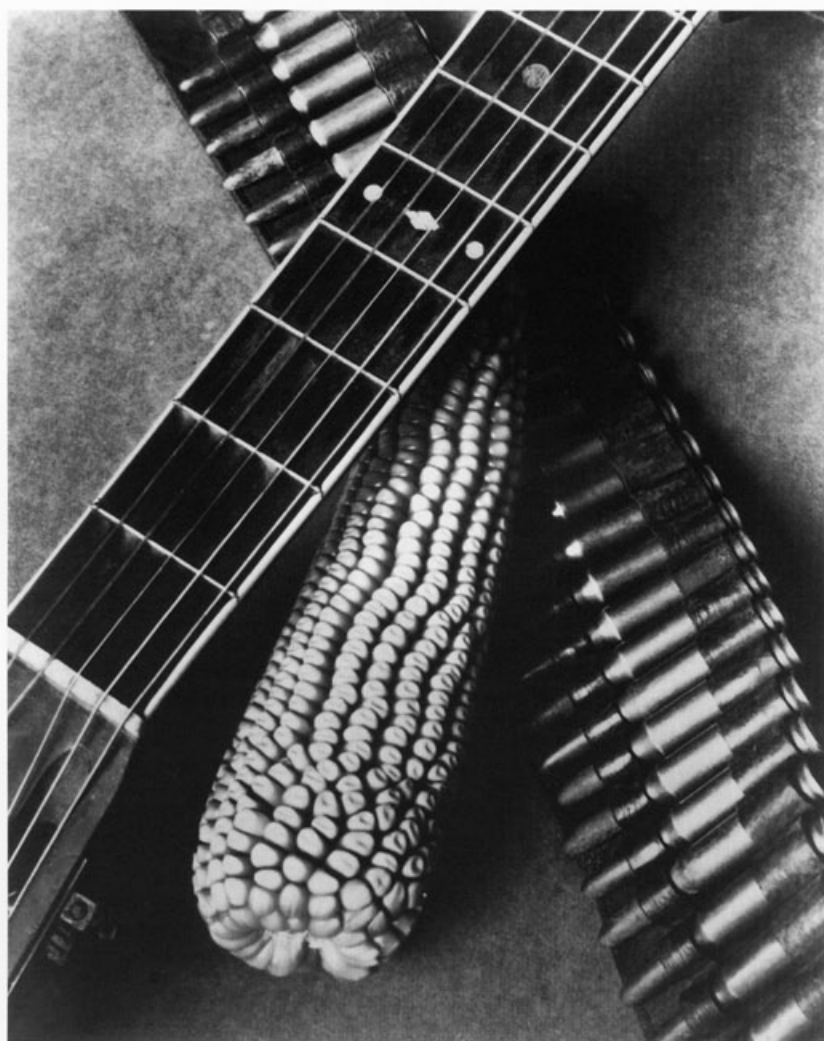
More recently, the noted Weston scholar Amy Conger has struck an oddly chiding maternalistic tone about Modotti's politics:

Modotti "possibly...even felt an affinity for people on the streets, which could be seen as consistent with her later association with the Communist Party."<sup>5</sup>

"Lastly, I believe that the skeletal simplicity and nobility of Weston's photographs of her as well as his references to her in his daybooks have made Tina exceptionally relevant today instead of being another exotic and old-fashioned leftist."

Can one truly appreciate a political artist while belittling her politics so off-handedly.

Finally, the politics of money—one would have imagined that money was the least likely of all things to revive interest in Modotti. Yet, several years ago (1991), one of Modotti's images (*Roses*, 1924) fetched the extraordinary price, \$165,000, at auction; an unheard price for a single photographic image and especially for one by a relatively unknown photographer. Following suit, the value of all her other prints have skyrocketed. Several have sold for more than \$50,000. Tinissima has come bounding back—another knack she always had—not only into the public eye but right into the top of the art market. Could one



Tina Modotti, *Bandolier, Corn, Guitar*, 1927

#### SOCIAL PRODUCTION

#### & CURVES OF BEAUTY

## Tina The Photographs of Modotti



doubt that a major museum retrospective was in the offing?

Big money is usually followed by scandal and Modotti's photographs have followed this rule. Upon Modotti's death the prints and negatives that she had kept with her passed into the hands of her *compagno di vita*, Vittorio Vidali. Upon his death (1983), Vidali intended to bequeath them as a gift in her memory to the people of Mexico.<sup>7</sup> Instead, they have ended in the hands of Vittorio Vidali's son, Carlos, who is in the process of selling them off one by one at enormous prices.<sup>8</sup> It is one of the bitter ironies of history that Modotti's prints are now being sold for personal gain by the son of her companion for the revolution. The stamp of the Fifth Regiment<sup>9</sup> had been put on the back of the Modotti prints that were in the possession of Vidali. Many of them are now hidden, sealed from sight by expensive frames. How emblematic indeed! Although Modotti always fought against the repressive role that wealth played in society and always rejected the idea of art as conspicuous consumption for the rich, her work has now become a valuable commodity, held captive to money.

With the end of the Cold War, Modotti's deeply committed politics no longer make her too vexatious a figure, so we can begin to look at her work more 'dispassionately', at least as dispassionately as we can see Modotti's prints through the massive curves of dollar signs.

## II. CURVES OF BEAUTY

*Organization of the producing class against the dominant class invariably produces conflict. Out of this struggle comes more or less intense rhythms of emotion, tracing out the curves of beauty implicit in the ardor and joy of the fight, the natural results of the tussle with a mighty economic problem.*

—translation by Tina Modotti of the words of Xavier Guerrero, May 1927

*I consider myself a photographer, nothing more. If my photographs differ from that which is usually done in this field, it is precisely because I try to produce not art but honest photographs, without distortions or manipulations.*

Tina Modotti, 1929

What should a Modotti retrospective set out to do? If you deal with a photographer like Modotti solely as an artist, (which is basically what a retrospective in a museum does, of course) you may end up by smoothing down the political edges of her work. Nonetheless, given the many distractions provided by her politics and tumultuous life, the aim of this exhibit—to focus attention mainly on Modotti's work as a photographer—is a needed and worthwhile emphasis.

This retrospective exhibits 130 prints—slightly more than half her production.<sup>10</sup> Curator Sara Lowe has done exemplary work in tracking them down throughout the world. She has turned up little unknown photographs in such unlikely places as Canberra, Australia, while, closer to home, in Mexico and the United States, she has brought to light many a strong print that had languished relatively unnoticed. This chance to view so much of her work may not be soon repeated.

In the exhibit Lowe has chosen to present Modotti's prints grouped by

*"My God Edward, your last photographs surely took my breath away. I feel speechless in front of them. What purity of vision...they stirred up all my innermost feelings so that I felt a physical pain."*

Tina Modotti to Edward Weston, July 25, 1927

subject matter—flowers, architectural images, abstracts, workers, portraits, folk art, the women of Tehuantepec, puppets, Germany. Inasmuch as Modotti usually fixed her interest mostly on one subject at a time, the concept works reasonably well. Yet several reservations about the Philadelphia show should be mentioned. One wishes more attention had been paid to the installation for such an important exhibit. Surely, the straightforward 'modernist' manner of hanging that Modotti (and Weston) favored—frames of the same style and size—would have been more appropriate than the rather distracting miscellany that stares out at the viewer from the walls of the Philadelphia Museum. There are a few unhappy examples where the installation seems dictated more by the frames than by the images. [An especially elaborate frame that surrounds the portrait of actress Dolores Del Rio overwhelms everything in its vicinity.]

In the catalog accompanying the exhibition Lowe's research brings us the first accurate record of dates, sizes, medium, locations concerning Modotti's work, all of which, previously, had been woefully inadequate. The catalog, fully researched and meticulously documented, promises to become the indispensable reference work about Modotti's work. Regrettably, in such a thorough work, a listing of Modotti's major exhibitions is not included.

As a visual record of Modotti's work, however, the catalog disappoints grievously. It is painful to see such a mediocre result for a photographer who was always committed to high technical standards in her work.



Tina Modotti, Mella's Typewriter, 1928

Instead of being simply useful by printing as many photographs to size as possible, the layout designer has gone into his balancing act, reducing, enlarging, even cropping a few images. The poorly reproduced plates bear no relation to the warm sensitive tones of Modotti's work. Without getting into any Stieglitzian fury about the impossibility of reprinting photographs, Modotti deserved far much better.

But how such caviling falls away when one looks at the show. How strikingly beautiful Modotti's prints are—especially in comparison to those we knew only through reproduction! Whether they attract by their lucid formalism, their documentary intent, or their political purpose, all never fail



Tina Modotti, Roses, 1924

to provide visual pleasure. What an impeccable eye, what an irreproachable sense for form and beauty!

Modotti seems to have leapt full-grown from Weston's dark room into the center of the photographic world; within months of her first instruction, she was printing out one remarkable image after another. What astonishes is the unerring nature of her gift from the onset. Her work shows a thorough mastery of the medium; she has a complete, sure, and unostentatious virtuosity that makes her images startle us again and again.

*El Manito*, the claw like flower, as a reproduction always seemed a stark image that was too obvious an idea, but the actual print has a gentleness that surprises. Her platinum prints—the materially notorious *Roses* (\$165,000); a stunning series of doors, stairs, telephone wires—are exquisite in their subtle range of tonal values. Her images of glasses, quiet uninhabited interiors, archways have a grace of design and a delicacy of execution that are her distinctive signature. In such pictures one can see the rightness of Diego Rivera's remark that Modotti was more abstract, more ethereal, more intellectual as an artist than Weston.

As much as Modotti enjoyed sensual pleasures in her life, eroticism never explicitly entered into her work. Nor, despite her own experiences as a model, was she ever attracted to the

nude as a subject. Her single openly erotic image, the *Calle Lily*, 1924 suggests the influence of her friend Imogen Cunningham—or could it be the other way round? The provoking question of influences upon Modotti's work—and, conversely, her influence upon others—still remains to be fully explored.

One of Lowe's eye-catching finds is the remarkable image that Modotti made of crumpled tin foil, 1926. Its modernist abstraction seems as contemporary as the day it was made. (There are some mysteries that surround this print. One wonders if tin foil was available in Mexico of that

period? Could it turn out to be one of the few images that Modotti made in the United States?)

Suddenly Modotti's work took a decisive turn midway in her photographic life: she made her great and astonishing leap—from modernist to revolutionary artist. Although Modotti had always moved in political circles in California and Mexico, her work had never contained political content as such. The first political image that she made—the only one that she ever made while she was with Weston—remains one of her finest and most popular, the *May Day Parade/Campesinos*, 1926. As always, the sureness of her eye was amazing.

Soon after Weston's departure from Mexico at the end of 1926, Modotti joined the Mexican Communist Party and began, in the company of her new lover and companion Xavier Guerrero, her 'tussle with art and mighty economic problems.' Guerrero, one of the Mexican muralists and founding editor of the Communist Party journal *El Machete* was the crucial—and usually overlooked—influence that led Modotti to fuse her art and politics. It was while Modotti was with Guerrero that she began to produce some of the most original solutions to the challenge of making political art. She created her great series of symbols of the Mexican Revolution; she transformed Bandoleers, guns, corn; hammer and sickle, guitars and sombreros into a revolutionary call to arms. She had discovered her great and natural gift—how to balance political intent and aesthetic impulse within her work.

Mexican and Latin American radicals accept her warmly as one of their own and made her symbols theirs. During the several years of this period one wonders what came first in the making of her photographs? the eye or the politics? The balance is so fine that no one can tell; perhaps not even Tina knew.

Hands have always been a common subject for photographers. Weston had made images of Modotti's hands and Modotti, also, echoing her mentor, took a photo of her mother's hands. fine photographs both of them, but they do not stick in the mind like Modotti's blunt image of hands resting

*Photography...takes its place as the most satisfactory medium for registering objective life in all its aspects...I believe that the result is something worthy of a place in social production, to which we should all contribute.*  
from *On Photography* by Tina Modotti, 1929

dist or social documentaries, Modotti never blatantly manipulated the response of her viewers. Even the most explicit of her political works, the photomontage *Elegance and Poverty*, 1928 has a disconcerting distance and coolness to the poverty of its subject.

issue in Modotti's life. What does it tell us about Modotti? She knew the citation itself, because she quoted it in the brochure of her final show in Mexico. When she snapped her photo, did she know the words were by Trotsky? Was Mella a Trotskyite? Was Mella's murder a political assassination by the Cuban dictatorship or by the Comintern or a personal vendetta? Was Modotti involved in the murder knowingly or unknowingly? A photograph of a type-writer is often used as a symbol of communication; here it raises nothing but questions and doubts—it remains a deeply ambiguous image. Politics had come crashing into Modotti's art and would soon bring the great adventure of photography to an end.

After the death of Mella, Modotti still had two major subjects left—the women of Tehuantepec and Marionettes—before she would leave photography and Mexico.

The Tehuantepec women's photos, with a few impressive exceptions, are among the weakest of Modotti's work. Modotti never had the knack of a good street photographer. She never really got into the idea of a snapshot; nor did she seem able to work unobtrusively or secretly. She seems lost without previsualization and too dependent on her ground glass composing; the more successful of these subjects are generally static or posed.

The puppeteer Louis Bunin and his marionettes were another story. The last great series in Modotti's work was based on puppets who were characters from Eugene O'Neill's *Hairy*

The Mexican Government did indeed pull its strings and deported Tina Modotti from Mexico in 1930. She ended in Berlin where she attempted to continue her work as a photographer. Quick eye that she always had, she caught the youthful hope of revolution in the *Young Communist Pioneers*, 1930 her last well-known political image, but was soon in Moscow working as a communist functionary. The photographer of elegant abstractions and maker of political icons had left the world of art and chosen a life of total political commitment. Her odyssey through photography was essentially finished. We really do not know the reasons for her choices, but we do know that she chose not to put photography at the service of her final mentor, Joseph Stalin.

The emblematic photographs of Tina Modotti have begun to suffer the fate of all politically inspired art. Explicit messages that Modotti's intended have faded away, what remains are her more elemental themes. Modotti is still the woman with a banner, the beautiful banner of her work. It is no longer the banner she started out with, but, nonetheless a banner that can remind us of the compelling synthesis art and politics can create 'in the ardor and joy of the fight against the dominant class.'

Robert D'Attilio is a native of South Medford, MA and writes about Italian radicalism in America.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Barkhausen, Caccuci, Poniatowska, Hooks, Constantine, Vidali.
2. She received a major notice in the important journal, *Creative Arts*. She was the first photographer to be featured on the cover of *New Masses* (four in all). She was on the American intellectual travelers' must-see list in Mexico City (John dos Passos met her there and was an admirer of her work, the precocious left-sympathizing leaning Harvard undergraduate Lincoln Kirstein included it in his landmark photo show).
3. Sarah Lowe, p.144, n.9. It should be noted that what was earlier considered "mysterious" (i.e. the manner in which the prints were given to MoMA), is now clearly political.
4. p.54. *Cubism and American Photography, 1910-1930*, John Pultz and Catherine B. Scallen, Clark Art Institute, 1981.
5. p.16. *Tina Modotti Photographs*, Maria Caronia, Idea Editions, Westbury, NY, 1981. Caronia received her information or misinformation largely from Vittorio Vidali, a dubious source.
6. p.70 ew 100, 1986. p.276 Amy Conger *Tina Modotti: Una Vita nella Storia*, Udine, 1993.
7. I was told this by Laura Weiss, Vidali's frequent collaborator and friend, when I visited her in Trieste in 1984. Vidali had died the preceding year. She gave me a list of materials that had just been shipped to Mexico, supposedly for this purpose.
8. Carlos Vidali is Vittorio Vidali's son by Isabel Carbajal, the woman he married soon after Modotti's death. Carlos came into Modotti's work only by the accident of birth. Despite being a Mexican citizen, he has not felt obligated to preserve Modotti's legacy for the people who inspired its images.
9. The military unit that Modotti and Vidali were attached to during the Spanish Civil War. It seems that Vidali marked all her surviving prints with the regimental stamp in memory of their common struggle.
10. Sarah Lowe, *History of Photography*, v.18, n.3, Autumn 1994, p.205. This total does not include several hundred or so mural prints that Modotti made for the Mexican muralists of their work. Throckmorton galleries exhibited a particularly exotic item in their exhibit which ran concurrently with the opening of the Retrospective in NYC, has about several hundred that were in the possession of Traven; 10 of them were handcolored, possibly by Modotti. The Metropolitan Museum has been rumored to have bought one, in which case we can be sure they will attribute the coloring to Modotti. Money does seem to talk in the current state of affairs with Modotti's prints.



Tina Modotti, *Mexican Sombrero with Hammer and Sickle*, 1927

on a shovel, 1927. These hands have become a powerful call for social justice. Radical and proletarian as the image may be—it was used for a cover of the American Communist journal, *New Masses*—Modotti, one should note, also made it as a platinum print. Whatever the nature of her subject Modotti always remembered to offer beauty its due.

Photographs that Modotti shot during the construction of a Mexico City stadium give another example of the remarkable synthesis she achieved during this period (1927). Modotti, under the immediate visual influence of the Mexican muralists—her friends, lovers, *companeros*—has given us two powerful studies of the labor and skill that go into construction work. But during the same time she has made two other equally powerful studies in her best modernist manner: *Stadium*, 1927 an abstract study of the shadows thrown by the seats of an empty stadium and *Stadium Exterior*, 1927 an eerie DeChirico-like view of the stadium exterior with construction scaffolding; no people or workers are to be seen in either image. Modotti's heart of hearts may have had its doubts about the constructs of the modern world. She may have felt that all might not be sweetness and light after the revolution. In this instance, one wishes that the concept of grouping photographs by subject alone had been relaxed; hanging these four images together might have offered a less canonical sense of Modotti's vision.

Unlike many political propagand-

The figures of Modotti's workers, women, campesinos seem to have been transported from the social struggle into a clear harmonious setting, into a world of classic dignity and stillness. Women wash, work and rear children with an easy assurance; workers balancing beams, shouldering banana stalks, carrying blocks of stone embody the grace of labor well done. We do not see the worker sweat; he turns into a symbol of the dignity of labor; campesinos reading become an icon for the revolutionary potential of education; a sea of hats turns into a symbol of solidarity.

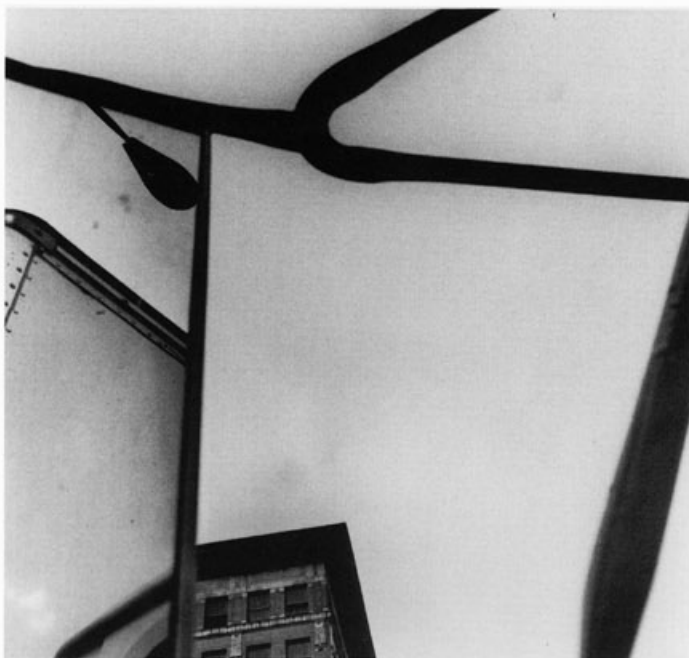
*La Técnica*, 1928 a 'modernist' shot of a typewriter, rather unusual for that period of Modotti's work, turns out to be an image that is at the center of Modotti's life in every sense—personal, political, moral. It is a typewriter with a sheet of paper inserted; fragments of a text are visible. The 'machine' (técnica) belongs to her lover, Julio Antonio Mella, one of the leaders of the Cuban Communist Party, who would be murdered shortly after the photograph was made (1929). The text was first imagined to be the unfinished text of Mella that had been found in his typewriter after his death, but later investigation discovered the words were actually those of Leon Trotsky. At that time, when Trotsky had been kicked out of the Communist pantheon, any good party member found using his ideas and words would be in political, if not mortal, peril. Since Mella's murderer is still unknown up to this date, how to read this photograph remains a central



Tina Modotti, *Hands of the Puppeteer*, 1929

*Ape*, a drama which was, itself, based on revolutionary themes—an indictment of America for its spiritual sickness, materialism, and greed. Reunited with a theatrical subject Modotti's vision caught fire. Hands again, but a puppeteer's hands—the hands of craftsman and the hands of a string-puller. The puppet symbolism was an obvious comment on society and, perhaps, even mirrored Modotti's personal feelings of the moment—being yanked around by the tensions of Mexican politics.





Luciano Rigolini, *New York*, 1990

## DECONSTRUCTING THE CITY

**"Citta Aperta/Open City"**  
Luciano Rigolini at  
Farish Gallery, School of  
Architecture, Rice University,  
September 15 - October 28, 1995

Ed Osowski

*Editor's Note: Rigolini's show will be on view at Rice University's Brown Art and Architecture Library and the Fondren Library during FotoFest.*

"I would like to see more clearly, but it seems to me that no one sees more clearly." Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Luciano Rigolini's ten black-and-white photographs of various urban settings, exhibited under the title "Citta Aperta/Open City," are large, challenging, nearly monumental works. Made over a six-year span, from 1990 to 1995, they depict according to their titles, locations ranging from Paris and New York (1990), to two images of Houston (1993), to the most recent work in the exhibition, a photograph made in Phoenix in 1995. The locations also serve as the titles of the works.

Rigolini records the banalities of the post-industrial urban landscape. Concrete freeway ramps and supports, parts of motorized vehicles, steel braces and columns, electric wires crossing the horizon in grid-like patterns repeat from one photograph to another and echo visually across the gallery.

What holds little interest for Rigolini in these photographs is recording what is unique about Kyoto or Houston or Berlin. One would be hard pressed to imagine a Chamber of Commerce using any of his works to "sell" that particular city to a potential client. Rigolini seems concerned with a much more important issue—providing evidence that the act of seeing has reached a crisis point, that what was once believed to be "evidence" is now part of a more profound realization that the visual landscape is a fictional

creation.<sup>1</sup> That these are photographs of cities on three different continents is their least interesting feature.<sup>2</sup> What actually engages the viewer is the difficulty of reading these works, of deciphering the details, of piecing together their fractured sections. The monumentality of the photographs becomes part of Rigolini's ironic methodology.

Consider the photograph *New York*. Here the individual pieces threaten to crumble before one's eyes. A steel brace, a street lamp, the upper floors of a loft-like building—these are the few items that one can identify with some certainty. The sharp, crisp edge of the roof-line of the building is the single point of stability in the photograph. The photograph itself consists of a number of parts, of quasi-geometric shapes, that dissolve and reconfigure as one attempts to analyze them. Its various parts do less to hold the photograph together than to bring the viewer up against the unflinching self-referential and self-reflective qualities of the image. *New York* holds one's attention, initially, by its visual representation of the clichés one can short-hand as "urban chaos." But this is its most obvious quality. Threatening to collapse before the viewer's eyes, "New York" is much more than a visual metaphor or equivalent. The difficulty one experiences in piecing together its individual parts speaks directly to the naive and sentimental belief that what the camera records is "objective truth."

There is no way of knowing from Rigolini's ten photographs what distinguishes one city from another. On one level, Rigolini is attempting to show how the nine cities he has photographed

are interchangeable, how nothing separates Baltimore from Osaka, how Paris could easily be Houston, how the post-industrial West is everywhere.

If one associates Paris with broad boulevards, classical facades, and handsome vistas, then Rigolini's photograph can only be called perverse. In *Paris* Baron Haussmann's grand city is reduced to a street crowded with parked automobiles and a pedestrian mall. But the principal element in the photograph is a large horizontal band dividing the image into two sections. Above this band all is perfectly clear—the sky, a few roof tops, some trees. Below, perhaps photographed through a double pane of glass, the scene is blurred—shapes dissolve and factual clarity is lost.

Rigolini's photographs are balanced, carefully composed, and precise in their imprecision. One notices how in one of the two Houston images a collection of round shapes—the curve of a windshield, a group of oil storage tanks, a large black circle on the window an automobile's rearview mirror—echo one another. This visual rhythm, almost painterly, holds together an image that would disintegrate without it.

In Rigolini's photographs nothing rests firmly or securely. The man-made world—there is little that is "green" or living in his photographs—is as flimsy as a house of cards. Freeway ramps angle oddly or threaten to lose their balance (*Los Angeles*) or they slash across the photograph's surface like Franz Kline's sweeps of black paint (*Houston*). Peculiar shapes angle from the ground (*Phoenix*) or block off most of the surface (*Berlin*). When he pays visual homage to another photographer, as he does in *Osaka*, it is to take the precision and clarity of Charles Sheeler's photographs of industrial settings and turn them upside down.

Farish Gallery was an especially appropriate place in which to consider

precisely placed objects that cannot be precisely identified, his photographs are about concealing, are about the limits of describing and showing.

Accompanying the exhibition was a handsome portfolio of the ten images and an essay by Lars Lerup, Dean of the School of Architecture at Rice University. In his essay "Beyond Architecture" Lerup focused on how architecture has lost what he calls its "symbolic values" and its "capacity to inspire." Tangentially Lerup's musings addressed Rigolini's photographs when he described contemporary architecture as plagued by "invisibility and a will to formlessness."<sup>4</sup>

Rigolini's photographs are not merely illustrations of a crisis in architecture. The crisis he exploits extends far beyond the practice of designing buildings. Rigolini's photographs are at the center of a cultural and aesthetic shift in the practice of photography, one tied to the effort to loosen finally photography's ties to the belief that it somehow possesses some kind of visual "truth." Rigolini's photographs come from a viewpoint in which metaphor and symbol have collapsed. What his photographs show convincingly is that there are no reasons to trust the conventions of seeing, describing, and depicting. These are photographs meant to illustrate one point: photographic illustration has reached a dead end.<sup>5</sup>

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### FOOTNOTES

1. The most profound analysis of "modern ocularcentricism" is found in Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.) Jay's text bears directly on Rigolini's photographic method as well as that of numerous others. What Jay defines and what Rigolini's photographs represent is a post-modern way of seeing, one in which certitudes elude the viewer's reach. "Whether or not one gives greater weight to technical advances or social changes, it is thus evident that the dawn of the modern era was accompanied by the vigorous privileging of vision. From the curious, observant scientist to the exhibitionist, self-displaying courtier, from the private reader of printed books to the painter of perspectival landscapes, from the map-making colonizer of foreign lands to the quantifying businessman guided by instrumental rationality, modern men and women opened their eyes and beheld a world unveiled to their eager gaze" (p. 69). The lifting of that veil, Rigolini would have us conclude, was a trick.

2. There is no evidence that Rigolini actually photographed in the locations he names. He includes no elements or visual clues to ground each photograph in the city of its title: There are no palm trees in Los Angeles, no deserts in Phoenix, nothing Japanese about the two works made in Japan. That one of the two Houston images contains oil-storage tanks is no "proof" that this work "documents" Houston. The photograph resolves (or dissolves) itself into a consideration of echoing spherical shapes. So powerful is the tendency of the modern industrial setting to fracture into random, disconnected parts that even pre-industrial cities—Berlin, Paris, Baltimore—are defined by Rigolini by how they break into seemingly arbitrary fragments.

3. Cervin Robinson and Joel Herschman. *Architecture Transformed: A History of the Photography of Buildings from 1839 to the Present*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987, p. 10

4. No. 35 in a series of publications.

5. The author thanks Paul Hester for numerous conversations that opened his eyes to the difficulties of photographing and looking at buildings.



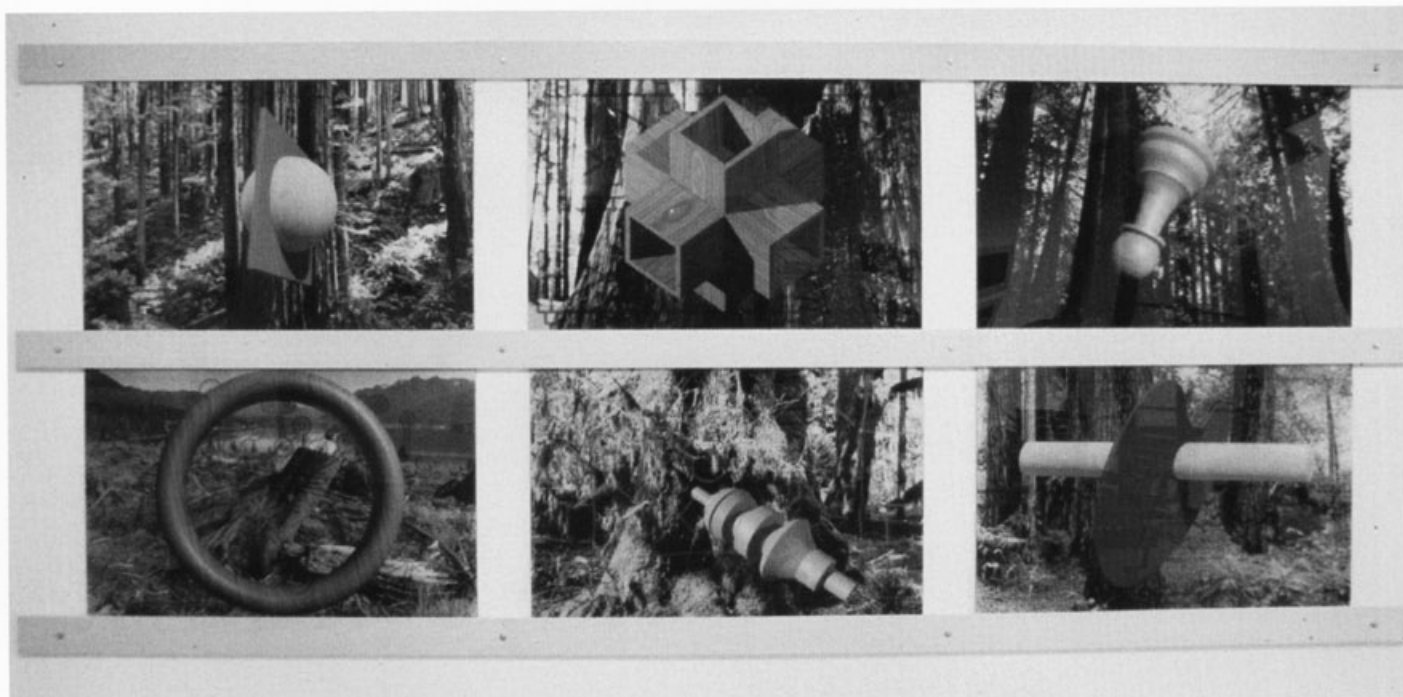
Luciano Rigolini, *Paris*, 1990

Rigolini's compelling photographs. His works challenge a number of preconceptions about the very nature of architectural photography. If the chief purpose of architectural photography is to provide a sharp, well-defined image of a structure, an image that shows with clarity the "factual component of the design," Rigolini subverts in a grand manner these expectations.<sup>3</sup> His images do not explicate; they do not clarify: Rather, with all their evasive qualities, with their



# metamorphoses

## PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE ELECTRONIC AGE



MANUAL, *The Constructed Forest*, installation photo, 1993, courtesy Moody Gallery, original in color

**Metamorphoses: Photography in the Electronic Age, Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, June 9-July 30, 1995**

**Eric Davis**

As a society we have long lived with Buck Roger's ideals of the twenty-first century. So long, that we no longer recognize being on the cusp of a new age in which technology will make our lives easier. We are *there*. Inventions once considered advanced now seem archaic. Steam engines, automobiles, and electricity have given way to the information superhighway, space shuttles, and nuclear power. The computer age has made us so demanding, we find it difficult to wait for the next improvement. We want *IT* and we want it *now*. As a result, technology has in a way become its own worst enemy. We need it, but loathe it, as it has become so interlinked with our existential fabric that we can not even die without it. Technology has made our "dreams" come true.

It seems appropriate then that Houston, the home of NASA and Compaq computers, would be a venue for "Metamorphoses: Photography in the Electronic Age." Photography, after all, is an art form invented from technology unlike painting and sculpture that have a prehistoric basis.

The concept of photography is grounded in reality. Since its invention we have looked upon and physically held it as tangential proof of a subject's existence. The photographer has a *real* subject in front of the camera. The actuality of reality is hard to deny. With digital imagery, however, one has the ability to create a totally fictional reality—a digital reality. Digital photographic subject matter looks real; it is hard to overcome the veracity we have been taught to see in photographs. Yet

just as we intuit traditional photographic subjects to be real, we ultimately know digital imagery to be false. Nowhere is this collision of ideas more evident than the work of Pedro Meyer and the collaborative team, MANUAL.

Pedro Meyer has been known primarily for black-and-white documentary images. Meyer, however, has not fully given himself over to the possibilities of digital imagery. He still incorporates images from the *real* world.

The evenness of Meyer's work in the exhibition, all from 1991-1993, quickly fades. He finds a momentary respite in the slight humor of *The Strolling Saint*, but the remaining works fall flat. Meyer is still caught between social commentary and purely aesthetic imagery. In the crossover, his messages become so heavy-handed that the viewer resists being force fed attempts to raise their consciousness. *Mexican Migrant Workers* is intended to be a caustic statement about the

in their work, however, are totally computer-generated.

In the exhibition, MANUAL mixes social commentary with elements of fantasy. Although the commentary now seems a standard part of their repertoire, it is not repetitious. They have long been taking visual stands on cultural icons including television, DaVinci's *Mona Lisa*, and the "landscape." MANUAL makes its point ever so subtly, but very powerfully.

The installation of untitled images from *The Constructed Forest* best exhibits the clash between the ideals of technology and the natural world. There are, however, two battles of the titans working here. The more overt of the two is one that humans have waged against nature for centuries. Like technology, we need the "landscape," but often loathe it, and consequently, try to make it ours through various means of improvement. Also, like technology, without the landscape, society could physically die.

Mankind's quest for a better world has consequently pushed it westward. This has subsequently meant the natural world, the true forest, has had to make room for man's new constructed landscape of homesteads, shopping areas, and office buildings. In MANUAL's work, man is represented in the floating designs in the images. These seemingly utilitarian objects are, theoretically, made from materials taken from the natural world and molded for our use.

The irony of such fabrication is that the objects do not look natural, look real—they appear plastic. They possess the same quality as man's attempt to produce "simulated wood grain" for those who can no longer afford the real thing (economically or ecologically)—one of inexpensiveness. The plasticity of these "natural" objects is further complicated by the fact that they are computer generated.



Pedro Meyer, *The Temptation of the Angel*, 1991, original in color

Meyer has been known to humorously play with the conception of falseness in digital imagery with pint size humans listening to monumental ceramic mariachis or his Claes Oldenburg homage of giant chair on display in a public setting. In "Metamorphoses" he displays a mix of fantasy and social awareness. *The Temptation of the Angel* is the most successful of Meyer's images in the exhibition. Although most viewers have grown to question spiritual beings, *Angel* pushes one to believe in the possibility of their physical existence. Digital imagery is temporarily granted a moment of veracity.

collision between the poverty of the workers and the excess of America as found in the hedonism of Las Vegas. It fails, however, as a digital image, because the viewer knows the setting is visually fictional; as a result, the actual plight of the workers is weakened as the image takes on a fictional appearance.

The collaborative efforts of Ed Hill and Suzanne Bloom, known as MANUAL, fully celebrate the possibilities of digital assistance in creating a contemplative blend of aesthetics and social commentary. The techno-landscapes, floating balls, and other oddities found

They do not exist in our material world.

The production of these objects can be taken a step further if one considers MANUAL's use of framing. The handsome frames are made of actual wood. They have been, however, carefully constructed to meet the artists' conception for presentation and, usually, sale of the work. The notion of the work as a product is enhanced further by the artists' signature, often displayed as a stamped M in a circle; much like the emblem for product registered trademarks. MANUAL's idea of using a mass-produced product to create mass-producible works of art would greatly appeal to the artists of the Dada movement. Surrealism, born from Dada, also centered on the irrational but was more positively charged than its nihilistic parent. The movement tried to reconcile the contradiction of dreams and reality into what Andre Breton, Surrealism's official spokesperson, called a "super-reality." Dada and Surrealism allowed the artist to use ideas and techniques previously not thought suitable for serious work.

The rise of digital imagery then is the perfect cross of these movements. It is shocking the art world's complacency within traditional photography values. It deals with the illogical and sometimes absurd. Finally, it fully allows the reconciliation of dreams and reality into Breton's super-reality—now a digital reality.



Shelly J. Smith, *Untitled Nanbird*, 1992, original in color

Paul Thorel is one of the most successful in accomplishing this task. His images are on the very edge between the two states of mind. Thorel, however, depicts that last gasp of memory between unconscious and alleged conscious reality—that fleeting moment before waking when one tries to retain the thought. Titles of works such as "Look madame, the snail is flying!" and "There is not a single rascal in all of Denmark" complement perfectly the nonsensical, irrational state of mind that produces dreams. We have all wished we could capture our dreams on film; Thorel seems to be working toward such realization.

Martina Lopez, not unlike Thorel, is interested in reconstructing memories. Thorel's dreamlike imagery tends to accentuate the illogical, sometimes absurd, aspects of unconscious thought. Lopez's images, though, attempt to revive very specific memories. At first the works appear to be autobiographical, centering on her family. The viewer, however, can easily bring personal reference to her work. The existence of billions of photographs of our own familial memories helps bring a commonality to Lopez's digitized recollections. This factor is taken further as she now searches junk



Osamu James Nakagawa, from the *Billboard Series*, 1993, original in color

sales for imagery that carries experience common to her own.

If one could find fault with Lopez's elegiac memoirs it would be with the amount of digital assistance necessary to produce her work. The only indication one has that these are not traditional collage or montage images, is the lack of physical edge normally found in such efforts. The majority of the works in the exhibition owe homage to the montage and collage artists of the early twentieth century. Lopez in particular owes a debt of gratitude to the magical constructs of Joseph Cornell.

As shown in Houston, Osamu James Nakagawa, who holds an MFA from University of Houston, opens the exhibition. Nakagawa finds photography to be the "expressive bridge" between being American by birth and culturally Japanese. Caught between the two, he uses this perspective to investigate and present his views of Western society. Using the pop culture iconography of drive-in movie screens and advertising billboards, he depicts overtly public or political situations juxtaposed against seemingly innocuous scenery.

The social commentary of Nakagawa's imagery is well intended. He wants us to think about the juxtapositions, but they occasionally appear strained. He carefully chooses which billboard or movie screen landscape is the setting for his inset images and they seem appropriately placed in the "natural" landscape. If a subtext of these images, however, is the encroachment of humans against nature, for questionable consumer purposes, then it fails—Nakagawa uses the manmade structures to sell us his view on social issues. Only in the works, *Gas Mask*, *Martin Luther King*, and *Cowboy*, does the combination ring true. The placement of the "Golden Arches," in *McDonald's*, over a cemetery and the marching Klan members, of *KKK*, in a flowering field, come off as heavy handed.

Nakagawa acknowledges that he pastes these photographic "messages" onto his images of the screens or billboards. These images are then reprinted with some digital enhancement as normal color photographs. It is with this acknowledgment that the challenge of the exhibition, and digital photography, begins. The question arises: Did these images need to be

created with digital assistance? The answer is a resounding *maybe*.

If one reads the labels carefully, however, he or she would have surmised the answer is yes. The descriptions of photographic medium ranged from the simplicity of Nakagawa's computer-altered photo output as Type C print to Eva Sutton's computer photomontage output by film recorded onto black-and-white sheet films, printed onto photo-sensitized paper and selenium toned work. With such oblique information, how could the viewer feel the technical wizardry was anything but necessary?

The technological aspects of digital assistance are nothing, if not a conundrum. Medium descriptions are minimally useful to other photographers, but here they could potentially lead viewers away from aesthetic concerns to those of pure technology. The question of digital assistance becomes more difficult to answer as the very inability to decipher the work's creation is what pulls the viewer back to the aesthetic issues.

Deanne Sokolin openly acknowledges her images are not dependent upon digital assistance. Yet her work succeeds because of, once again, the inability to discern what she has done digitally. Works such as *Untitled 9* (which recalls a draped *Victory of Samothrace*), *Untitled 10*, and *Enrobed Head*, all from the *Covering* series, are fine examples of the virtual reality possible with computer enhancement. The covered objects, influenced by sitting Shiva, a Jewish mourning ritual, become fully sculptural as they float in a dark void. The texture of the sculptural cloth is all the more seductive as one feels he or she can reach in and envelop the works themselves.

The three untitled images by Nancy Burson are much less seductive, but no

less visually intriguing. The anomalous portraits of children with craniofacial deformities are not real, but they could be. Although they are digitally-altered photographs, children and adults unfortunately suffer from such maladies. Burson has been criticized for intentionally creating images of deformities. She is, however, challenging us to come to terms with the actuality of such deformity in the real world and to adopt a new way of looking at *everything*.

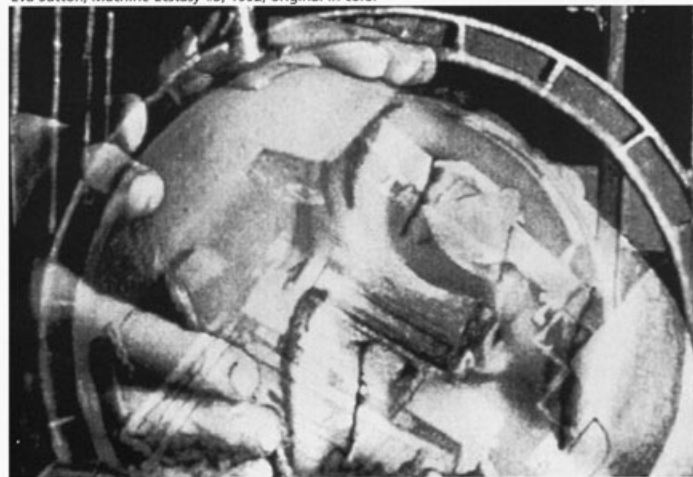
The least challenging aspect of "Metamorphoses" was found in Blaffer's upstairs gallery where images using Iris ink-jet technology were quietly tucked away into a corner. Despite the beauty of Olivia Parker's *Horseplay*, David Byrne's whimsical *Clouds*, *Mannequins*, *Fruit*, and, Eileen Cowin's mysterious narrative, *Based on a True Story*, the works here owe much more to the actual printing process than the technological possibilities of digital assistance. The potential expressive qualities of the two processes was inadequately shown and largely appeared as a commercial for Nash Editions, where these works were produced.

Many of the artists in "Metamorphoses" successfully bridge the gap between traditional and digital photography and dreams and reality. Just as many, though, are unconvincing in their need to utilize digital assistance to create imagery, they have not fully explored the capabilities of digital realization. Yet, given the chance, as traditional photographers have been, those artists can discover their creative niche within the medium.

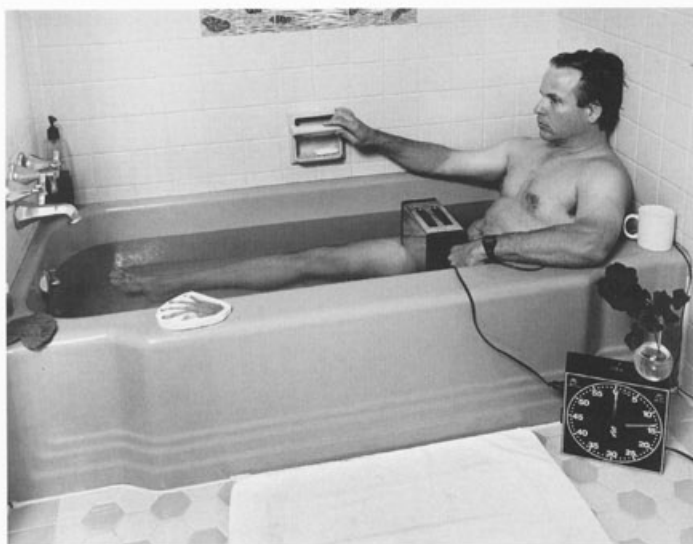
What will remain provocative about computer generated imagery is the artist's ability to remove telltale signs of handwork and rearrange an image at will, including the total removal of unwanted subject matter. The person creating the final image, hopefully the photographer in this case, has complete control over the resulting creative expression. There are previously unknown worlds to discover through digital assistance. The downside is that computer manipulation can be used to tangentially harm or falsely implicate individuals with altered imagery. Whatever its use, we are still a long way from fully accepting the possibilities of digital imagery as legitimate artistic expression.

Eric Davis is a curatorial assistant in the Prints and Drawings Department of the Museum of Fine Arts Houston.

Eva Sutton, *Machine Ecstasy #3*, 1992, original in color







Bill Thomas, *Tub and Toaster*, 1991

# CAUSA SUI

## On Bill Thomas' works entitled *Suicide*

Fernando Castro

*Editor's Note: Bill Thomas was a 1993-1994 Houston Center for Photography Fellowship recipient.*

Not since Dostoyevsky's character, Kirilov, killed himself to prove that God did not exist, has the representation of suicide served nobler purposes than in Bill Thomas' *Suicide* series. But, alas, Kirilov's argument is a *non-sequitur* and Thomas' images are not of actual suicide attempts, but rather about a series of idiosyncratic performances representing self-annihilation simulacra. What the artist presents us with are acts that could lead to suicide but in fact lead to photographic artworks.

In all of Thomas' portraits, death seems to follow as the result of intricate, carefully designed apparatus whose causal mechanisms have already been or are about to be set in motion. Except for *Chain and Train*, 1992 and *Swimming Pool and Concrete Walls*, 1992, he is definitely a willing captive of the lethal machinery in the other thirteen pieces of the series. These works give us evidence to believe that the photographer has or had at some point the freedom to choose whether to proceed with self-destruction or not. Secondly, although in some cases impending death will occur in spite of a last-minute hesitation, in other cases the agent has control up to the last second. Compare the circumstances of *Old Water Joke and Bazooka*, 1993 where death will follow as soon as somebody fortuitously opens the door at an unexpected time; and *Tub and Toaster*, 1991 where the exact time of death is known because it has been intentionally set.

Thomas has been quite explicit in tracing the motivation for his *Suicide* series to his growing up at the peak of the Cold War. He explains, "To put this into a little bit of perspective, this was at the height of the Cold War—1959—so on at least a weekly basis we'd all go into the hallway and do the old duck-and-cover maneuver in case we got bombed—and were, I think, all led to believe that any day the Bomb was going to come." The demented logic of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)—which turned

irrationality into common sense and rationality into a potentially lethal game—ruled the lives of millions of people for nearly forty years or the better part of Thomas' life. The nuclear threat that loomed over Thomas' life nearly meant the end of human life.

But as if this nightmarish backdrop was not enough, Thomas lived through real catastrophe. "On Tuesday, September 15, 1959, a man carrying a suitcase loaded with dynamite entered my elementary school," he recalled. "Moments later he detonated the bomb on the school playground, committing suicide, killing five others and wounding seventeen more. In the chaos that followed, we were evacuated from the building and inadvertently ushered past the bodies, stepping to avoid scraps of unidentifiable flesh. I was half-numb, half-terrorized." When the bomb went off the twelve-year-old Thomas was under the impression that it was the atom bomb for which the school children had been rehearsing.

It is very tempting to say that henceforward the conjunction of MAD, emergency preparedness, and suicide were imprinted on Thomas' psyche. Our beliefs, however, are not causally determined by our experiences. After his childhood trauma Thomas could have chosen to avoid the subject of suicide altogether. Even if he had never lived through that trauma, he may have still done this work after a reading of Dostoyevsky, Mishima or Camus. The tension between determinism and free will may very well be one of the important themes behind Thomas' intricate machines and willful performances. Certainly, there are no traces of carnage in his works and the beauty of his tableaux indicate that his works

are about something more logical than happenstance.

According to a sequence that Thomas himself has spelled out, the traumatic but repressed memory of the bombing at drove him first to psychology, then to the literature of existentialism, and finally to photography. By exposing repressed memories the individual may achieve a catharsis liberating him from his demons tormenting. Thomas' way is to expose himself in self-depiction as suicidal. His pursuit would be a dismal one were it not for one redeeming element in his work: humor. It is a dark humor, indeed, that inspires a hilarious work such as *Seesaw and Ice Cube*, 1991 despite the imminent possibility of self-hanging. In this photograph, the lethal seesaw is triggered by the diminishing weight of the ice as it melts. Like many of the other apparatus of self-destruction laboriously fabricated by Thomas, it unavoidably elicits laughter. Together with *Dog and Shotgun*, 1991 and *Knife and Iron*, 1992 these are more the kinds of machines concocted by Wyle E. Coyote than by a self-destructive depressive. So, does Thomas intend to rob suicide of its seriousness, to make light of it? Not at all: humor, as proven by more than one surrealist, is not necessarily superficial; on the contrary, it can be, as in this case, quite revealing.

The sets of the *Suicide* tableaux are as intricate as they are ingenious and by the artist's own admission constitute "the most pleasurable part in the process of making a photograph." The final product of these endeavors is not suicide, nor the ephemeral act of role-

allusion to the envy and iniquity of modern technological societies. The historical fact in question is that Bayard's photograph was motivated by the official denial of his claims of being one of the inventors of the photographic process. Thomas' reminder of this image of Bayard as photography's first purported staged suicide victim expands the range of implications of his own work.

Ponder how very different Thomas' work would be if it claimed to document actual suicides; like Weegee's gruesome police photography of murder victims. In that case it would not be a reflection on the issue of technology and life/death but a commentary on the phenomenon of suicide. Moreover, the saprophytic motivations of the photographer would be rendered morally suspicious. But in Thomas' work, the only vestige of factuality, of unintervened reality, are the sets for the photographs that Thomas calls "readymades." *Tractor and Plow Disc*, 1993, for example, is maximally readymade because little was added by the author. Thomas' sets, as O. Winston Link's, combine varying ratios of "already-there" to "added" objects. For this and other parallels, the *Suicide* series is more closely related to Link's elaborate photographs of locomotives than to any reportorial work.

The works of Link are a late Romantic's celebration of a modern machine, Thomas' is an oblique reflection on the age of machinery that flourished in the nineteenth century and included photography in its flowering. The influence of modern

technology on death/life matters has been a matter of particular concern for artists since the aftermath of War World I. The reason is that modern machinery not only changed production of goods, but also altered the ways of massively inflicting death in wars and diminishing the worthiness of life in the labor environment. Dadaists denounced this situation with photomontages that often incorporated commercial and propaganda photographic images. His well-ordered sets



Bill Thomas, *Chain and Train*, 1992

playing by the artist, but a photograph. Thus, Thomas' artwork is not a public performance that photography simply illustrates, but rather a mostly private performance that contributes to realize the photograph. The final product is delivered with the fastidiousness of the 1/64 modern aesthetic, but also with a deeply-seeded skepticism about photography's veracity implicit in staging. It could be said that the works are created from the pleasure-seeking drive of the id, to the rational guidance of the ego, to confronting the taboo about suicide imposed by the superego.

Thomas' quote of Hippolyte Bayard's *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man*, 1840 in *Old Water Joke and Bazooka*, 1993 patently shows not only the tradition of staged photography that the artist has chosen to connect with but also makes a historicist

give that illusion of harmony present in 1950s commercial photography advertising electrical appliances. The toaster of *Tub and Toaster*, 1991 is from that decade in which middle-class life was finally conquered by convenient appliances.

Our enduring fetish for machines such as cameras, locomotives, and toasters has left an indelible mark on our own times in spite of the dark side of modern technology more easily discernible in guns and bombs. Notwithstanding Thomas' almost devotional celebration of machinery, his works do show some ambivalence about modern machines that at times borders on cynicism. *Chain and Train*, 1992 in fact, seems hurled directly at Link, while the machine in *Sleeping Pills and Tanning Bed*, 1993 reveals the "double edged" nature of technology that while producing a healthy

look inflicts illness. Modernity's promises of a better life are thus rendered, at minimum, suspect. It is this critical side that places these works within a postmodern *weltanschauung*: the abandonment of the unquestioning trust in modern technology.

One must be careful, however, not to give excessive weight to a post-modern posture by Thomas, for it is evident that he takes an ironic stance regarding almost everything that comes into his pictures—his own death as author of his works included. Contrary to the radical view of interpretation that dispenses with the author, Thomas inoculates his works against such abuse by placing himself, the author, into their very core. Although extrinsic to the works, the fact that they are self-portraits remains a crucial clue in their interpretation. To ignore the author would be to interpret these works as if they were not self-portraits. On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore Thomas' nuclear trauma in interpreting these works, but without that bit of biographical information the work would probably become more capricious, more idiosyncratic, and more subjective than the evidence suggests. In many of the works, the author overtly displays the act of releasing the shutter himself; this fact is germane to the interpretation that dissolves if someone other than the author released the shutter. Consequently, talk about Thomas' death, whether actual or pretended, imposes itself into even the most far-fetched interpretations.

In sum, insofar as it is both modern and postmodern, historicist and current, paradoxical and resolute, Thomas' *Suicide* series is above all an extremely intelligent body of works. Though some have unreflectively compared Thomas' art-producing machinery to Dr. Kevorkian's euthanasic devices, the former is definitely—as the latter is arguably—part of the process of producing life-affirming works. That they confront death self-caused does not diminish the fact that in them life emerges victorious. As in e.e. cummings' poetry, enduring life's wondrous intricacies, not death, is really their end. As cummings put it, "for life is not a paragraph / And death i think is no parenthesis." After all, nobody in these images is touched by "death's wandering guess," not Bayard, not Thomas, not the author.

Fernando Castro is a writer and photographer living in Houston.



Fannie Tapper, *Man Under Knife*, 1990

## A GRAVE DISEASE

**A Grave Disease by Fannie Tapper at University of Texas Houston Health Science Center, June 19-August 11, 1995.**

**Jennifer Elkins**

*"Tell her the joyous Time will not be stayed unless she do Him by the Forelock take."*

Edmund Spencer's sixteenth century words of wisdom reveal images of time-ravaged dreams, of songs never

sung and memories yet unmade. Time shows no mercy; the grave always beckons but man chooses out of fear to ignore the inevitability of his own mortality and retreats. He retreats because he fears that in this inevitable fate lies the possibility that he will face his grave knowing at some level that he went through life never having lived. Now and then a man becomes conscious of the fact that time has stolen his dream and he may then decide to confront time by making a daring attempt to steal back the dream in hopes that at least some semblance of it can be salvaged or possibly that

some piece of it could become reality and attest to a life fully lived. Fannie Tapper's exhibition "A Grave Disease" opens with the quotation from Spencer's sonnet and visually echoes his words while portraying the story of such a man, her husband, Wilfred.

Tapper's images chronicle Wilf's illnesses over six years. As she states, "The photographs resulting from this period are not all easy to look at. They are harsh reminders of man's inability, finally, to order his own life. At the same time, many attest to human-kind's courage faced with real adversity and with this particular man's unfailing determination and optimism." Elise Jenkins, Community Relations assistant at the University of Texas Houston Health Science Center where the photographs were exhibited this summer, commented on the viewer's response to these "difficult" images that reveal so poignantly man's desire to reconcile within himself the transitory nature of life and in the end to confront his own mortality. According to Jenkins, "Women find these images compelling, while men are terrified of them." Tapper's photographs tell the story of one man's journey. The tale crosses gender lines and becomes a collective narrative of society. One man's story becomes everyone's story as people project their individual fears and anxieties onto the images.

The grave disease afflicting many does not just ravage the body, it first kills the soul. The feminist critique has dramatically pointed out the various wounds inflicted on women by the patriarchy but it must be recognized that a system characterized by the conscious intent to devalue and undermine one gender in the end will wound both genders.

The masculine wounding at the hands of the patriarchy is intensely portrayed in the exhibit's most dramatic piece of work, *Man under the Knife*. This brutal photograph was taken shortly after Wilf underwent his fourth surgery to correct vision problems resulting from his diagnoses of Graves' Disease. Fannie states that it was only months before that Wilf had dolefully decided to close his office, to say goodbye to downtown and to seize the opportunity to realize the dream that had more and more dominated their conversations. "By Christmas we would be aboard our boat, christened, what else, 'Forelock,' and by January we would be headed for the Caribbean." This, however, was not to be; by March Wilf had already undergone four operations in an attempt to save his vision.

Historically, the patriarchal system has warned that dreams and visions threaten the rational and logical aspects of life. This devaluation of the imaginary life has caused a fear of the emotions associated with these imaginings, regarding them as potential for madness, or, worse yet, signs of the nineteenth century diagnosis of "hysteria," a woman's madness. The result has been to create artificial worlds isolated from the symbolic and devoid of emotion. As one is unable to perceive that an acceptance of the inner madness and irrationality might possibly lead to a state of true inner freedom that lies dormant in the truths stored in these imaginings, and which in the end will reveal the essence of one's soul. As Pascal observed, "Men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another form



Fannie Tapper, *Contemplation*, 1990



## WHEN ART AND SCIENCE C • O • L • L • I • D • E



Alan Rath, *Ouch*, 1993

**Bio-Mechanics by Alan Rath  
at the Contemporary Arts  
Museum, Houston, October 6 -  
November 12, 1995.**

**Peter Harvey**

Descending the stairs to the small gallery, one is greeted by two speakers approximately a foot in diameter suspended from the ceiling. These speakers are not in any sort of enclosure—their workings are exposed in plain view. The diaphragms are pumping like two woofers at a disco, and yet the only sound they make is barely audible in a quiet gallery and indiscernible when more than two people are talking within earshot. The speakers, alive with movement and the potential for sound, resemble two surveillant eyes (mouths, ears?) welcoming, broadcasting and beckoning to visitors. The electrical connections run through long, flexible conduit (the kind we used to call "gooseneck") resembling industrial optic nerves winding their way around a graphic panel and just under the door into the gallery. Once inside, the cables wrap around the existing duct-work until we see a third speaker facing a corner and a strange looking panel on the wall where these slowly pulsating life-lines meet and collect their signals. The label describes *Off The Wall II*, 1989 as "variable in dimension and constructed of wood, aluminum, electronics, and three speakers."

Most of the pieces in the show are constructed of naked electronics. The wiring, cathode ray tubes, and circuit boards are not covered with an oversized cabinet as they would be in a home stereo or television because the form and composition of these compo-

nents are integral to the sculptural experience of the show. As a youngster, I made a "hot dog cooker" out of a board, two nails and a lamp cord (don't try this at home). Wondering if my wiener was thoroughly cooked, I once touched it while the contraption was plugged in and felt the cool, unsettling buzz of flowing electrical current. This experience returned to me as I considered the fact that I was not at all tempted to touch the exposed wiring and circuitry of the works in the show—no doubt, much more carefully designed and safer than my hot dogger.

As the exhibit's title suggests, there is a biological element to the objects Alan Rath has created. The long conduits of *Off The Wall II* undulate like snakes in a slow groove. Several of the pieces contain moving parts or corporeal images. Pulsating, whispering speakers are a recurring theme. The quiet motion continues on several cathode ray tubes in other pieces around the room displaying various body parts in motion. *Ouch*, 1993 is a self-portrait of sorts with a picture of the artist's face on a cathode ray tube held in a vice. The image of the artist's face in a pinched expression on the CRT involves the viewer in a sly commentary on mediated representation. The television becomes both signifier and signified: the CRT is squeezed in the vice and the expression on the face looks as though it were caught in a closing elevator door. The vice is mounted atop a wooden stool in an apparent homage to Duchamp. The electronic works of the piece dangle from the seat by a pair of black handcuffs. Appearing in more than one piece in the show, manacles suggest a close but involuntary relationship.

In *Family*, 1994 a few strategically

stacked suitcases with speakers in them are cuffed to large chains leading to CRTs displaying close-up images of talking mouths. The baggage of the inescapable consanguine link is neatly addressed here without didacticism. The viewer is thus enabled to personalize the sculpture and include her/his own familial experience in its meaning. This points to one of the strengths of Rath's work: the ability to create an interesting object with avenues for viewer accessibility.

Alan Rath, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, assembles the circuit boards himself and writes his own computer program code for his pieces. The deft handling of the electronics along with the hand-made look of the work resonates that this is a meeting of the arts and sciences. More than sculptures or electronic art, these are not just examples of *les arts mecanique*; these are art gizmos. Some are reminiscent of Jean Tinguely and, of course, the CRTs strategically placed on the floor remind us of Nam June Paik (no stranger to M.I.T.). In an informative introduction to the catalog for the show, Dana Friis-Hansen attempts to seat the work in the context of "contemporary sculpture" by implying a formal relationship between Rath's objects and those created by Louise Nevelson, Edward Kienholz and some other, less dead, artists who are thirty years past "contemporary." We are informed that Rath shares Donald Judd's "industrial aesthetic" because he had one hundred boxes made, providing him "a standard formal unit with which to work." (I can't get a box of a dozen donuts anymore without considering the container a "standard formal unit."). This line of "art speak" doesn't do justice to Rath's ability to make a formally interesting piece that is full of meaning and accessible to the viewer. The strength of this combination is evident in *Linguist*, 1995 where the "abstract industrial forms" are combined with an image of a mouth on a CRT and a video game-like joystick. When a viewer manipulates the joystick, the tongue pops out of the mouth and licks the lips in a pattern mimicking the movement of the controls. A visitor might stand there and move the tongue around while considering the meaning of the piece and the experience of participating in an act of art. By touching the joystick, the audience passes beyond "my kid could do that" and is enabled to reach "hey look what I'm doing." The interactive nature of Rath's work and its interpretation contribute to its successful subjectivity. In other words, if you have the money and you haven't bought one of these pieces, you have some explaining to do.

Peter Harvey is a writer living in Houston.

of madness." It seems evident in the context of these photographs that the cultural constructs of twentieth century Western civilization derive from a system with the primary goal of containing madness. As it seeks to sterilize the image, the vision is rendered impotent and the soul is sacrificed in order to attain the material accouterments necessary to create an illusion of life. "The many people who sense their own needs and yet acquiesce in the prevailing system accept it in their minds by their deeds and thus confirm and strengthen it."<sup>1</sup>

With two more operations by the end of the year, Wif's vision was stabilized. Fannie explains, "By March of 1991 we had leased our house and bought a new boat, this one christened 'Graves' End,' and we were well into plans to leave on our long-dreamed-of cruise, when Wif's doctors discovered he had prostate cancer." After several more postponements they were finally ready to embark on their trip but in October as they were cruising Chesapeake Bay, Wif was diagnosed with an ulcer requiring emergency surgery,<sup>6</sup> thus ending the potential of making this dream into a reality. "The final episode to this saga is that in 1993 Wif discovered a concomitant muscular dystrophy, which required us to sell 'Graves' End' and move back home, close to the Texas Medical Center."

"A Grave Disease" is one woman's way of confronting time by putting distance between herself and the suffering of the one she loves. She has captured images that inform the viewer that "A Grave Disease" is about the intricate interaction between the body and the soul—the body so long ignored and the soul that has for years served as the sacrifice in a patriarchal system. Once again Spencer offers sixteenth century insight for the twenty-first century, "For of the soul the body form doth take; For soul is form, and doth the body make." A movement into the soul is a movement into the body and in this interaction both are potentially healed. The wounds at the hand of the patriarchal knife become the battle scars of the consciously-lived life.

Memories are those moments that one steals from the jaws of time. They serve to help re-member our lives. While Fannie Tapper's images are "difficult" on a variety of levels, these memories chronicle a journey through the chaos of the human condition and attest to one man's courage to re-order and thus re-create a life that in its end is fully lived. For in the act of confronting Time, he found the place within himself where Time stands still.

Jennifer Elkins is a freelance writer living in Houston. She received an undergraduate degree in anthropology from University of Houston and is pursuing a Master's Degree in counseling psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute.

### FOOTNOTE

1. Fontane, Theodor. *Effie Briest*, 234.

# THE KID TROUBLE WITH

Michael G. DeVoll

"Kids today!" This phrase, often uttered in exasperation by the "older generation" referring to the "younger generation," has been repeated for many years. You may also be uttering this phrase after seeing Larry Clark's film *Kids*.

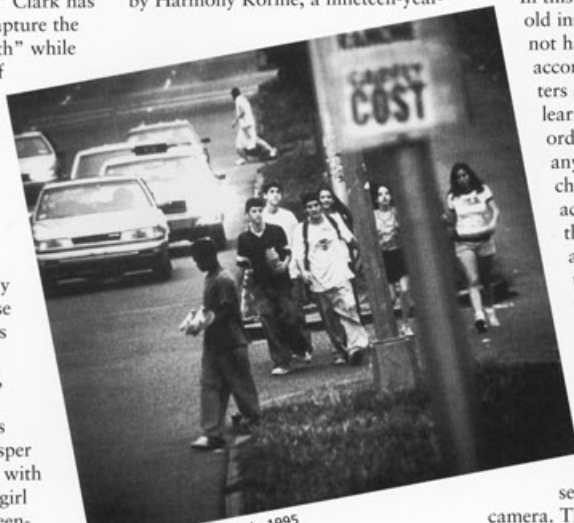
The press kit for the film describes this fictional drama as a cautionary tale; "twenty-four frenetic hours in the lives of a group of contemporary teenagers who, like all teenagers, believe they are invincible." Clark has set out, it continues, "to capture the beauty and tragedy of youth" while he "confronts the reality of adolescent sexuality in American society." The story revolves around a group of teens from the skateboarding culture of New York City's Washington Square Park—"teenagers living in the urban melee of modern-day America." The press release adds, "But while these kids dwell in the big city, their story could, quite possibly, happen anywhere."

The main story involves three teenagers—Telly, Casper and Jenny. The film opens with Telly talking an unnamed girl (possibly thirteen or fourteen-years-old) into having sex with him. It is her first time, but he "cares about" her and thinks she will really enjoy it. Afterwards, he meets Casper who has been waiting for him out front for two hours. They spend the rest of the day roaming around town—from Telly's house, to a flop house where they can get food, to the park to buy drugs, to a party at Steve's ("his parents are out of town"). Along the way, they steal beer from a convenience store, peaches from a fruit stand, and money from Telly's mother. They jump the subway turnstiles, urinate on the street, harass a gay couple, beat up a guy in the park, break into the public swimming pool after hours, sniff inhalants, smoke pot, drink beer (lots of beer), and talk almost constantly about sex. Telly's personal mission for the day is to find Darcy, the fourteen-year-old sister of a friend, and have sex with her. His *raison d'être* is having sex with virgins. Casper's personal mission for the day seemingly is to follow Telly around and get as wasted as possible.

We first meet Jenny in a bedroom with four other girls talking about sex. We learn she was "de-virginized" by Telly a year ago, and even though he said he "cared for her," he has not talked to her since. The previous week, she had accompanied her friend Ruby to a clinic to get tested for HIV. Ruby wanted to be tested after recently having unprotected sex. In the clinic interview we learn that Ruby has had vaginal intercourse with "eight or nine guys" ("maybe four times unprotected") and anal intercourse "three, no four times" (only once protected). She is approximately sixteen or seventeen-years-old. Although, Jenny has only had intercourse once, she goes with Ruby to keep her company and is

tested for HIV herself. Ruby tests negative and Jenny tests positive. Her personal mission for the day then becomes tracking down Telly and confronting him. She checks the flop house, a nightclub and finally the party at Steve's house.

There are two important factors to keep in mind. This film was directed by Larry Clark who is known for his gritty, brutally frank, documentary photographs of a young drug subculture from an insider's point of view. Secondly, the screenplay was written by Harmony Korine, a nineteen-year-



From *Kids* by Larry Clark, 1995

old male skateboarder Clark met in Manhattan's Washington Square Park.

Because Clark was "interested in the culture" of these skateboarders, he began photographing them. He came up with the idea of making a film about them but knew it had to be written by an insider. He had met a high school kid (Harmony) who said he was a writer, read one of his scripts, and asked him to write the screenplay. Three weeks later it was done.

The film has caused no little brouhaha. Although it won acclaim on the film festival circuit, when released nationally the MPAA slapped it with the dreaded NC-17 rating. The rating was based on the graphic sexual language and the rampant drug use by seemingly underage kids. The sex scenes are not overly graphic and the language is no worse than many other recent films. *Kids* runs neck-in-neck with *Goodfellas* in the profanity race. The young age of the characters combined with these features may have prompted the ratings board to exceed the R-rating. The message implied by the rating seems to be that these actions are tolerable in adults, but border on obscene in minors. The film was unable to be released by Miramax (now owned by Disney) with this rating so Excalibur Films, a new distribution company, was set up for this purpose. *Kids* was released unrated.

So what is the point of this film? Clark calls it a cautionary tale—one that is instructive or a story with a didactic purpose. Clark is trying to teach us something. What do we learn from the film? We learn that teenagers are drinking, smoking, doing drugs and having unprotected sex. If you

read the newspaper or turn on any daytime talk show, you already knew this. We also learn that having unprotected sex, even once, puts you at risk for HIV. With all the HIV/AIDS education done today, probably anyone over eighteen already knew the risks of unprotected sex. At one theater in Houston nobody under eighteen was admitted, while another theater posted an NC-17 rating. Assuming similar situations at theaters around the country, minors had little access to this film and its lessons.

If we accept Clark's film as a "cautionary tale," then his intention is to teach us something or change attitudes in some way. You have to demonstrate the cultural concept you are trying to modify, but it has to be done with a critical eye to discourage perpetuation.

In this instance, a nineteen-year-old insider albeit screenwriter did not have the necessary tools to accomplish this end. The characters are too shallow for us to learn anything from them. In order for the audience to glean any knowledge from a story, change or growth in the characters during the course of the story is necessary. Since all the action takes place in twenty-four hours, they don't have enough time to learn anything. These kids end up where they started. When Telly and Casper go to the park to buy drugs, they meet a group of kids. The extras in this scene seem to be very self-conscious in front of the camera. This points to a basic problem with this film. Watch a four-year-old in a group of adults—if the child does something cute or funny that gets the adults' attention, the child will repeat that action endlessly to hold that attention. The writing of this film seems to be all about repetition of



From *Kids* by Larry Clark, 1995

shocking action and language to the point of numbness on the part of the viewer. Are we seeing the reality of these kids' lives or are we seeing kids performing for shock value to get our attention? The problem is, once they get our attention, they don't tell us anything.

We do not learn the underlying causes of the kids' actions. Why is Telly a sexual compulsive with a fetish for virgins? Why does Casper spend all day completely wasted on alcohol and drugs? What has led either of them to this end so early in their lives? Why does Jenny, like so many other girls, let Telly talk her into having sex? Why does Jenny let a boy at a club force a pill into her mouth so that she spends the last half of the film strung out?

In addition to not learning the cause, we never learn the solution. There is

one point at which some words of wisdom could be offered, but the writer misses the opportunity. Instead, he gives advice that any kid wishes adults would give. In a cab, Jenny talks to the driver, an older man, who tells Jenny she looks sad. When asked what's wrong, she says "Everything's wrong." So what words of advice does the haggard old sage offer: "Forget about it. Life is too short, so try and be happy." Just forget about it and don't worry about the fact you have a terminal illness. The treatment of the adult characters in the film is typical of a teenager's attitude. Telly's mom bugs him to get a job and lies to him about not having money. The two other adults in the film are the counselors at the clinic. I felt more compassion for them than for anyone else in the film. They seem to be drowning in a depressing, hopeless task of getting the teenagers to think about their lives beyond the present.

Many of the characterizations are also clichéd and sexist. The boys are the bragging, sexual aggressors who conquer and then go on their way. The girls are the blushing, sexual pacifists who are left alone to deal with the consequences of their actions. This is most vividly played out when Jenny finally finds Telly at the party while he is having sex with Darcy. Instead of actually confronting Telly, she looks on momentarily and then turns and leaves the room. After she passes out on the couch from the effects of the drugs, Casper comes around and quietly assaults Jenny while the other kids sleep in their drugged and drunken stupors all around the room.

However, my greatest concern with the film is Clark's perceived universality of the story. Clark says he has captured the "reality of adolescent sexuality in American society" that could "quite possibly, happen anywhere." There is no story that can capture the reality of a diverse American society. What he has captured is the reality, or hyper-reality, of a society of skateboarders in a small section of New York City. This is not to deny that the issues addressed are problems throughout the United States. But there are many other adolescents who, for a variety of reasons, have experienced or are experiencing a completely different day-to-day reality.

Clark has attempted to portray a "universal" teenage experience but has instead given us a bleak, hopeless view of small segment of teenage society. And he does it with clichés, sexist attitudes and shallow characters. At the end of the first scene of the film, as Telly is leaving the obviously upper-middle class home of his latest conquest, he leans over a stairway railing and spits on the dining room table below. This action may sum up the filmmaker's intention. It is good to question societal norms and, from time to time, issue a wake-up call to help people address society's problems. However, if you spit at the people you're attempting to reach, they may not listen to you.

Michael G. DeVoll is another artist who has given up still photography to pursue the moving image. He works as HCP's Associate Director.



Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Seville*, 1932

## BYSTANDER:

**A History of Street Photography**, by Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz. Bulfinch Press, 1994

Dick Doughty

Considering the influence "street photography" has had on the many ways photography and photographers have been thought of since the medium's invention, it is surprising—and somewhat disappointing—that a book such as *Bystander* was not written until now.

Westerbeck and Meyerowitz have come out with their formidable compendium staking out a significant historical territory. The book is a product of several years of discussions during the span of their decade-long friendship—theirs has proved a fruitful collaboration. Westerbeck took the lead on text and Meyerowitz guided illustration selection: It is refreshing to see working photographers so intimately involved in the construction of photographic history.

On first impression, *Bystander* comes as a validation of the hunch that many photographers, either working or dabbling in "street shooting," have always had that they were operating within a genre all its own. Until now, nobody had bothered to work out where it all began and ended, being, as Westerbeck writes, such a "diffuse, fragmented, intermittent one...a succession of influences and inheritances" that has meant many things to many people at many different times and places.

The authors make it clear "street photography" is to be understood at face value. It is photographs made in public places, often urban thoroughfares, of ordinary people who are usually—but not always—unaware of the camera. Hence the title, *Bystander*—one who is also at times variously voyeur, witness, critic, romantic and even assailant.

The "Bystanders" are mostly well-known photographers. This is not, the authors argue, the place for archeology but rather for documenting the interconnections among those who have had the most obvious influences on the tradition. The chrono-biographical taxonomy that gives the book its ordering principle is thus without surprises. There are four "eras" to street photography, each presided over by one man: Eugene Atget, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker

Evans and Robert Frank. A host of others presage, follow, diverge, synthesize, revive, elaborate and punctuate.

The streets they have photographed are overwhelmingly those of Paris and New York. Ranging from Victorians lugging collodion plates on their way to distant colonies, Bill Brandt recording his own London, and a single representative photo by Raghubir Singh to the chapter-length discussion of Harry Callahan and what Westerbeck dubs "the Chicago School" in the end everything photographed outside Paris and New York appears like souvenirs of historical day trips. "Paris has been...an occasion to which photographers have risen," Westerbeck writes; later Meyerowitz explains that among New York street photographers—at least the ones he hung with—that "really Fifth Avenue had the pulse of life...[where] the mix was best," and the possibility of another city is implicitly inconceivable. For better or worse, it is the images from this narrow slice of streets, with brief forays into some hinterlands and crucial influences from others (Hungary, Germany, Britain most significantly) that makes up photography's contribution to our collective memory of urban life in this century.

But within the constraints of their framework, Westerbeck and Meyerowitz deliver a wealth of insight through carefully selected images and well-crafted words. The book opens with a sequence of twenty photographs called "Overture" framed by a conversation between the authors that also, in its full-length form, closes the book. Thus these comments literally frame the volume.

Westerbeck: I remember Garry and the rest of you often calling pictures "tough" or "beautiful." Why was "tough" such a key word for you?

Meyerowitz: "Tough" meant it was an uncompromising image, something that came from your gut, out of instinct, raw, of the moment, something that couldn't be described in any other way. So it was TOUGH. Tough to like, tough to see, tough to make, tough to understand. The tougher they were the more beautiful they became. It was our language.

The authors approached their study of street photography itself in much the same warm, exuberant terms. They waded into it less as critics seeking larger cultural meaning and more as aficionados seeking to tell everyone else just why they have such a good time in this field. The result is pleasantly infectious without losing intellectual force.

At the end of the book, however, it becomes clear that Meyerowitz's particular brand of effusiveness stems from his own experiences in a small group of 1960s and 1970s American, New York-based photographers, all of whom had the dedication and good fortune to become well-recognized within the field. All naturally drew on the full scope of the street tradition, with an emphasis on the branch that started with Jacob Riis and Weegee, and later manifested in William Klein and Robert Frank. Within Westerbeck's text it quickly becomes clear Meyerowitz is not speaking for most of the photographers of the nineteenth century as well as a host of gentler practitioners—Lartigue and Doisneau come to mind—for whom "toughness" was not part of their visual vocabulary.

The choice of photograph immediately following this introductory text is equally instructive regarding the authors' approach. Cartier-Bresson's photograph of a Seville street uses two boys as bookends to contain an intricate, rhythmic, multi-planar, angular composition balanced, Kandinsky-like, upon a single circle that is deftly echoed by both a sewer cap and a half-arch in the deep background. From the photographer known best for his aphorism "the decisive moment," this is, in terms of its human subjects, an entirely ordinary moment. The figures are forms, apparitions, presences lending motion and humanity to the stony street. The "decisive moment" is in the street itself brought to life for the image through light and film, a moment revealed by the photographer's subtractive process of selection that here is not unlike a sculptor's removal of just enough material to leave a finished, polished, coherent statement. It is a "tough" image not in its subject matter but in its form, first in its angularity and its anonymity, and then more importantly in its aesthetic as a finished photographic print demanding a knowledge of modernism for full appreciation.

The photograph ending this section, also by Cartier-Bresson, is a brilliantly edited counterpoint: the famous image of a blurred figure of a man about to step into a puddle, his heel caught the instant before it touches the glassy water, his movement echoed by a dancer silhouetted on a poster in the background. Here is the leap of faith that instantaneity requires, the devil-may-care attitude of the roving street photographer as well as the whimsy, joy and magic the medium offers to both practitioner and viewer.

Inside, each of the book's four sections opens with a similar sequence of photographs. The images are not all well-known ones, thus giving insight into the breadth and depth of the tradition. Appearing in pairs and groups across pages, they are edited to complement each other with formal, tonal, gestural and geographic connections so smooth they vary between the revelatory and the coy. So presented, each image becomes newly contextualized by referents lying within the tradition itself—other street photographs that until now had little or no bearing on each others' meanings or intents. One wishes for brief insight from the authors into the thought guiding this editing.

Westerbeck's lengthy text rewards close reading. He writes as a well-versed insider (he is currently associate curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago) and both authors received support through extensive discussions with the photographers themselves, historians and estate curators. The one notable exception is Robert Frank, who, alone among the photographers cited, did not permit reproduction of his photographs and thus now, as when he first published *The Americans*, remains one of the only photographers in this genre consistently capable of dodging his viewers' expectations and even eliciting anger.

That this book was so long in the making pays off in the wealth of information that consistently illuminates motives and crosscurrents among photographers. Westerbeck studied these images meticulously and synthesized history and biography superbly. For example, early street portraits by photographers such as Samuel Bourne and John Thomson are read not as prototypes of "real" street-photographs-to-come, but as advancements in their own right fraught with the tension between the photographers' technically-based frustrations at their inability to produce truly candid images and their simultaneous acquiescence to values of the time that led them to "order the world [in photographs] the way his audience wanted." Likewise, Atget is read in light of his subversion of the standards prevailing for architectural photography at the time as well as his contacts with surrealists. Cartier-Bresson's post-war work is explored through nearly four pages elaborating his adoption of several facets of Zen practices. Like Cartier-Bresson, William Klein and Robert Frank receive chapters of their own. Throughout, Westerbeck pays attention to the institutions that photographers built as well as the institutions that built photographers' careers. It is to the book's credit that the pre-modernist era receives no less attention than those eras that followed, either in length or in significances ascribed.

Only at the end, in the chapter titled "Still Going," does this illumination falter. This chapter takes the form of a conversation between Westerbeck and Meyerowitz, and the result is clubby and narrow. Its subjects are almost exclusively Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander and Meyerowitz himself. The insights into working methods, attitudes and the intricate social and professional interrelationships among these photographers are interesting in a talk-show kind of way, but in the end they illuminate a self-declared in-crowd more than they do the genre itself. To wind up such a rich book, published in 1994, with work whose heyday was the late 1970s seems a shame. How street photography is being interpreted by young photographers of the 1980s and 1990s who operate in vastly changed photo markets, technology and cultural values would have made a far stronger closing to this otherwise immensely valuable survey.

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# ONE LIFE—SEVERAL LANDSCAPES

AN APPRECIATION OF ROBERT ADAMS

Peter Brown

"Over the years I have come to believe...that we live in several landscapes at once, among them the landscape of hope, and that though we must usually focus on what is characteristic of the immediate and troubled present, it is rash to say that other geographies are unimportant or even finally separate." Robert Adams

I. In Japan, as you probably know, there exists a wonderful and humbling (if not downright paralyzing) designation—that of "living national treasure," a governmental honor that's bestowed on people, rather than things. It occurred to me recently, that if such a distinction existed in this country that the photographer and writer Robert Adams would, by this time, have been nominated for it. His name, I found myself imagining, would have been forwarded on—probably repeatedly—to whatever purgatorial list exists for these wise, gentle old people. Handed on up the chain with great warmth and conviction, until it reached the executive committee (composed no doubt of a few road-weary senators, governmental flacks and with the *eminent grise* of Jesse Helms blathering in the background.) And then...embarrassed confusion would reign, for the committee to its relief, after reviewing Adams and his work would decide that: first, the man's simply not old enough. "He's not!" they would exclaim indignantly. (And happily for us all, it's true.) Secondly however, unless they were visually illiterate, which of course could be a real possibility, they would have to recognize that the truths that Adams and his beautiful, barbed photographs tell are finally too unsettling and too persuasive for an environmentally vacuous government to raise to sainthood. For

Adams—as insightful and eloquent a photographer as any country might claim (armed as he is with the history of literature as well as that of photography) is simply too reasoned, too generous and finally too dangerous to be enshrined. (In all honesty though, it should be pointed out that he's been awarded every honor a photographer might aspire to—NEAs, Guggenheims, a Peer Award and now a MacArthur—but still...I think Jesse and the Freshmen might raise a cloud of toxic dust stamping their feet over national hero status.)

Robert Adams' work has been enormously influential, both to a wide viewing public, and also, perhaps particularly, to photographers of my generation. As I have considered it over the years, the work has always seemed a sustaining and challenging mix of beauty, hope, despair, anger and love. It's clear that Adams cares passionately for the American West, his home and window on the rest of the world—and his struggle for the past thirty years has been to suggest new ways of looking at and thinking about this world—what we have lost and what we might do with the ground that remains with us.

He does this in the most self-effacing ways. Given the charged, swirling atmosphere of land politics in the West, I find the tone Adams sets remarkable. He's no dilettante sitting at a reasoned distance. He is in there in the fray—but the voice he uses is one that both indicts and blesses at once. And it's a voice of complicity—he's hard on himself as well. His work asks us to notice the remarkable gifts we've been given, to see clearly the mess we've made of them, to stop and consider, and then to emerge, determined to recognize and create a landscape that's worthy of the best in us. Not a simple set of observations or requests, and of course not an easy

table to set for others to gather round—simply asking such questions often leads to self-righteousness and defensiveness. But Adams weaves a visual and rhetorical fabric that makes common ground and common sense, and he spreads it for us with unusual grace and humility.

Adams is normally a landscape photographer—despite an anomalous but moving book *Our Lives and Our Children* on the people who live near the Rocky flats nuclear weapons plant—and a landscape photographer primarily of the high plains around his Longmont, Colorado home. But his work also ranges throughout Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska and the Dakotas, up onto the eastern slope of the Rockies, over the rim, into the Great Basin and out to the West Coast. His photographs are often thought of as spare—though this has always seemed as much a function of geography as compositional choice to me—and they are generally small to mid-sized black-and-white prints. It is work that I believe would be accessible to almost anyone.

On an abstract level, the photographs seem a marriage of formal grace and social engagement, images that singly or in series are capable of producing responses ranging from the most spiritual to the most secular—fully dimensioned truths finally, in which fact and beauty conjoin.

He is the author of fourteen books, most of them published by Aperture. In the past year, he has produced four extraordinary volumes—two of photographs and the third, a collection of essays. Each of these is worth spending time with and each is worth repeated visits. Adams, who holds a doctorate in English and writes as convincingly as anyone in the photographic community, has collected much of his writing from the past few years in *Why People Photograph*, his

first book of essays since *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values* came out in 1981. *Listening to the River: Seasons in the American West*, published in fall 1994, is an extended sequence of Colorado landscapes—interrelating photographs presenting a complex, geographically and seasonally shifting set of panoramas. His third book, *West from the Columbia*, 1995 explores new territory: the land and sea around the mouth of the Columbia River as it surges into the Pacific. *Cottonwoods*, 1994, published by the Smithsonian Institution Press in its *Photographers at Work* series is a graceful compilation of thirty photographs that Adams has made of cottonwood trees over the years—a body of work that spans from the '70s to the present. The book includes, as well, a revealing interview with Adams in which he discusses his feelings for the West, the mix of environmental and aesthetic concerns that fill his work, and his affection for cottonwood trees: their existence and treatment being symbolic in a way, of all that is best and worst about the West. All told, these books represent a remarkable year's harvest—and though each was many years in the making, it's a nice affirmation of the MacArthur Grant, a multi-year fellowship that Adams received a year ago.

## II.

*Listening to the River* is one of the most enveloping photographic books I have encountered. In it, small black-and-white vertical photographs of commonplace Colorado landscape are grouped—up to six photographs per two-page spread—with the images interrelating first one to another, then page to page. Adams' subtitle is *Seasons in the American West* and in the book, a variety of currents are charted: seasonal, geographic, image

Robert Adams, sequence from *Listening to the River, Seasons in the American West*, 1994





to image, page to page, until the book [as one finds oneself rolling, bumping, smoothly gliding, dropping precipitously] becomes a river itself.

And it is aural as well as visual: we hear silence at first, the resonance of the plains, birdsong perhaps, then the rustle of leaves, the slap and rattle of water, wind through grass, branches being pushed back as we make our way through the landscape. It is altogether a sensual book, helped in this respect and others, by William Stafford's fine poems, which contribute to a mix of image and text that moves along smoothly—graceful turns, slow eddies, interesting detours, now and then a surprised trout. One feels the heat bouncing up from a stubbled field, cold feet from slushy snow, gentle spring winds, smells of rain and hot asphalt, the rumble of trucks, the prickle of a milkweed pod on the back of a hand, windsung barbed wire.

And the landscape varies—from open prairie crossroads and fields, to suburban streets and homes, to roadside trash, to foothilled heights and back down to fields and the plain. Up and down, back and forth, our vision shifting from side to side to take in these shifting panoramas.

The sequence begins in what seems to be late summer, goes through a quick fall, into winter and mud season, and then an extended spring and summer. Before this publication, I had not often seen Adams use a vertical format and never, to my knowledge, a 35mm camera which is wielded throughout in a bobbing, weaving almost corrective way: the same tree or field or horizon seen from slightly different points—a step to the left, two to the right—a way of photographic seeing that closely approximates the way we actually see. The use of the 35mm camera, with all its easy portability, lends itself well to the idea behind the book, which in essence is a series of walks in places that Adams knows well.

The book has some of the feeling of *Perfect Times/Perfect Places*, Adams' love poem on the relatively unspoiled Pawnee National Grasslands. But *Listening to the River* includes more: junked up mattresses, kids at rivers, geese flying over suburban streets, cottonwoods just hanging onto life beside



Robert Adams, from *West From the Indies*, 1995

developments [certainly an Adams icon]—all the flotsam and jetsam of plains culture, washed up by the roads and rivers.

And each image, as always, is beautifully photographed—not in a way that makes one-dimensional “art” of it: ‘Look at the texture in that piece of busted wallboard’ say—or ‘Look at the shadows on that road’ [though the recognition of beauty in the most common places is an important aspect of his work.] Just as importantly, and self-evidently, if you look at the photographs the beauty resides in the structure of each image. It is finally the gentle imposition of care and affection onto a place that has either been used utterly carelessly or has not before been carefully seen that matters most. And as Adams makes his inclusive compositional choices, there is a strange kind of reclamation that occurs—and not just for Adams. Reconfiguring and memorializing

something he has loved that has been beaten down, or pointing out a sacramental moment that ordinarily would elude us allows this alchemy to take place for us all. The book is not just plastic bags flapping on fences and it's not all meadowlarks—though it's more plainsong than heavy metal. It is mostly a mix that becomes, when seen in its riffing order—sad, glorious, open, pathetic, backbone shiveringly beautiful, whole, and in the end, redemptive. It's a great and eye-opening year-long walk. Leaves, pebbles and sand might pour out as the pages are turned.

### III.

I find Adams' writing rewarding and useful—and the essays that make up *Why People Photograph* are a fine introduction. Adams writes with a clarity unusual in the art world and with an intelligence that ranges widely—literature, politics, American history,

the history of photography and painting, religion, native American culture—all are brought to bear on his feelings about photography and its role in contemporary culture.

Adams' writing is simply clear. He is as careful with his sentences as he is with the composition of his photographs—a true parallel existing between the structure of his writing and that of his visual work: both I think finally set out to reveal in simple and transparent ways the wholeness of a complex idea.

“What Can Help,” the first of three sections in the book, is addressed to photographers trying to survive in the art world. The chapter titles are, illuminatingly: “Colleagues,” “Humor,” “Collectors,” “Writing,” “Teaching,” “Money,” and “Dogs.” He takes all of these things seriously. It's difficult to survive and do one's work and Adams is like the eloquent coach or teacher you never had quite enough time with—experienced, caring, pissed off, funny, eyes and mind open, opinionated—able to put into words all the shadowy careerist, ethical questions that plague you—and the equally murky self-serving answers you come up with, everything bumping together at three in the morning as you flop around, waking your spouse, wondering why life dealt you the hand of “art photographer” [a deviant and weirdly coded description from the very start].

But Adams is charitable and generous—and he has helpful advice. The first two essays in the book I think are illustrative. In “Colleagues,” he lines out the qualities that he finds admirable in his photographer friends—traits displayed in his own life and work as well: the ability to make compelling pictures; animation and enthusiasm in relationship to subject matter; the fact that these people don't tempt him to envy [see above]; their physical courage in dangerous situations, and their mental courage in withstanding the psychic battering such work often produces; their ability to continue on in the face of possible loss of artistic vision; an ability also to retreat in





Robert Adams, from *Listening To The River*, 1995

orderly ways when confronted by impossible odds; and finally their awareness of finality and of their placement in the natural world. All of this describes, if you stop to think about it, a kind, generous and committed group of people. We are reminded of what we have. Not only that we are not alone, but that those we travel with are interesting and, for the most part, well intentioned, kind and courageous people. And we need as much of this sort of thinking in the photo community as we can get.

His essay on humor levels a spotlight on both "funny photographs" and those humorous images that have a staying power beyond the punch line. Adams is famous for his lack of patience with juxtapositional, ironic, "pink flamingo" photography that those "in the know" often produce to exhibit cultural credentials in relationship to others not so knowing—a kind of photography that falsely demeans and momentarily elevates simultaneously.

The best funny photographs he says, "have something in common: We can see in them that the subjects know they are part of a joke, and their awareness excuses us from the discomfort that we might otherwise feel in smiling. The pictures are given to us by all parties, and so invite affections and identification rather than ridicule.<sup>2</sup> And in this welcoming idea I think he sums up a general credo—almost a photographic golden rule: Be honest, but be kind. Understand your intentions well and treat your subject matter as you would those you love.

The essays that follow include practical advice on how to deal with collectors; the functions that writing best serves in relationship to photography; the schizoid wonder/black hole quality of teaching; a variety of strategies to deal with money, and the usefulness of dogs, in art and as inspiration for all things. The essays are thoughtful, concise and lived out.

The second section, "Examples of Success," contains critical pieces on a variety of twentieth century photographers. They are wide-ranging and often deal with writing that has accompanied a monograph: an ill-considered biography of Weston say, or Szarkowski and Morris' remarkable job on Atget, or Ansel Adams' less than candid autobiography. Adams also agonizes over the conflicts between artist and subject matter: Weston dehumanizing his nudes, Strand [to America away from McCarthyism, Adams lapsing into formulaic response late in life.

The thing that sets the essays apart for me again is tone, and the tone comes from the struggle that Adams has clearly gone through to reach his conclusions. He gives the photographer the benefit of the doubt. He has taken the work in; it has become a part of him and the words that he uses are finally generous, even when damning. Temptations are real; life can change one's vision and when work fails there is understanding. More positively, he is profound with praise when work—such as Strand's *New*

*England*; Szarkowski, Morris and Benson's response to Atget; Susan Meiselas' courageous Latin American photographs or Laura Gilpin's particular gifts move him deeply.

The final section, "Working Conditions" examines issues of land and landscape in the West, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The three essays are a concise and sobering summation of what has happened and what we might do. While his stance is by no means overtly political, the ramifications of his thought certainly are, and the sense of loss he conveys is immediate. Adams knew the West well as a child and the West he knew no longer exists. It is this loss finally that I think most informs and motivates his work.

He speaks a number of times about pain, about it being one of the wellsprings of genuinely positive art—of the necessity of experiencing tragedy in order to create wholeness. And Adams' loss [not to be coy] of an Edenic West, is a personal, as well as national tragedy that has produced a generative set of images, images that set out to reclaim a land that only with time and work, can once again inch towards wholeness.

What else finally is one to do—other than grind away in bitterness at home or move off into exile? The latter being an option that Adams examines closely in Strand's life, and one that he and his wife Kerstin finally reject. His final response, like his work, is both practical and meditative. He mentions a number of concrete measures

that might be taken legislatively to recreate the space and stillness that once existed in the West, and he talks of creating a long walk, a pilgrimage of sorts that might be taken in the Plains, a contemplative journey in which thought and the natural world might once again peacefully join.

#### IV.

Adams' new photographic book, *West from the Columbia*, becomes a kind of benediction, in the same way I think some rivers do as they reach the sea. It is a quiet, cradling book. Not a lullaby—in that it's too awake, and not a waking dream either. It's meditative despite its historical notes, a book of safety, despite the condominiums and remnants of first growth forest represented, a book finally I think, about the beneficence of vast rivers and vast seas.

Adams and his wife Kerstin have vacationed in the Oregon town of Astoria for thirty years, a respite, they say, from the damaged plains and mountains of the interior. And in this time he has not often photographed the coastline. It's clear however, that he has stored up ideas. He knows this world well and the wonder with which he deals with it, I think, reflects his memory of a much less troubled West.

There are a number of new things that he considers in this book—the first being place. While the ocean is, in many ways, similar to the plains, it is also of course, quite different. And while Adams has photographed rivers before—even up to the Missouri, there

are few as vast as the Columbia. It's interesting to think of the way he might have photographed the tall grass prairie, say in the eighteenth century with its eight to nine foot stalks and blades, the wind patterns rolling through them like water. In them there might have been an equivalence to ocean waves, to tidal surges, to river water meeting the sea. And in *West From the Columbia*, time, immediate split second time, is consistently organized. One waits for clouds or wind or the sun or weather patterns to be just right inland, but the waves in this book are moving fast, and a new kind of visualization is needed to take them in and to make sense of them within this immensity.

He also returns to innovative ideas he has used in the past: as in *Listening to the River*, a number of spreads contain similar views of the same subject matter, creating wide vistas of river, land and sea; as in a number of images from his retrospective volume, *To Make it Home*, Adams tilts the camera to emotional and formal effect, creating a canted horizon line that in the panoramas particularly, sends us reeling until we are suddenly balanced in new and surprising ways; and, as in *Summer Nights*—a reverie of his on quiet nights near his Colorado home, work is done again in an edgy but still safe darkness.

The work achieved here has often been technically and physically difficult, yet despite difficulties, an effortless quality remains about the sequence, a quality that swings one into natural rhythms—of waves and rivers, days and nights, shifting sweeps of vision and shifting patterns of weather—from bright mornings to foggy afternoons to comforting nights.

And always the rocking sea and the surging river serve to create a visual music—of foghorn, surf, crying gulls, chugging boats, distant bells, children's voices, and somewhere, deep within the mystery of that fathomed onrushing water, the sound even of whale song.

*West From the Columbia* acts as a blessing because this river and the Pacific Ocean combine to form one for our continent. And Robert Adams, quite simply, has photographed them with great and transparent skill.

In the beauty of river and ocean, in their never ending strength, and in the natural reconciliation of opposites that they represent, grace and exhilaration are given. Unasked for, absolution can be felt, transgressions may seem absolved—and we are sent back into our world, momentarily redeemed, energized and ready for the difficulties that will always confront us. This book, to the beneficent extent that photography is able, serves to do the same.

Peter Brown is a Houston photographer. His work focuses on his family and the landscape of the Great Plains. He teaches photography in the Continuing Education Program at Rice University. Peter Brown will have an exhibition of his Great Plains work at Harris Gallery in Houston during FotoFest.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Adams, Robert, *Why People Photograph*, Aperture, New York, 1994. pp. 181-182.

2. *Ibid.* pp.23-24.



## EARLIE HUDNALL

Margaret Culbertson

The black-and-white photography of Earlie Hudnall, university photographer for Texas Southern University and board member of the Houston Center for Photography, was displayed in one of the Project Row Houses, 2500 Holman, from April 21 to September 24, 1995. The small row house used for the exhibition formed a light-filled exhibit space conducive to a show of this size. It also contributed a certain poignancy, since such row houses would undoubtedly have been familiar to many of the people in the photographs.

The show consisted primarily of portraits in which Hudnall captured distinctive individuals within strong compositions and with lovingly preserved details of skin, clothing, and surroundings. He included young and old subjects in both urban and rural environments. His documentary approach and attention to detail fits in the tradition of Walker Evans, although Hudnall's photographs are often lighter and contain more humor. Hudnall's deceptively simple, straightforward images are full of visual interest, joy, sorrow, and wisdom.

The photograph *My Thinking Time* demonstrates Hudnall's use of strong compositional elements that are reinforced by details. In the photograph, an elderly woman is caught as she pauses, looking away from the camera, to contemplate a rose. She is dressed simply, with curlers in her hair, and she leans against the handle of a



Earlie Hudnall, *My Thinking Time*, 1980

hoe. The woman's body and the handle of the hoe form a solidly-grounded, central triangle, while her projecting elbow and arm form another powerful triangular element. This compositional framework is complemented by striking details including the veins on the woman's hand as it rests on her hip, the wisp of loose hair hanging by her ear, the angles of her curlers, and the rose that has caught her gaze. The title reinforces the impression that this is a restorative moment of peace in a busy, work-filled life.

Hudnall's photographs show a beauty that can emerge from difficult circumstances, but they do not ignore disquieting effects of poverty and social neglect. However, this was not a show with a strident political or social agenda. The photographs were rich with the variety and pleasures of humanity, and viewing the exhibition was a rewarding experience.

Margaret Culbertson is head of the William R. Jenkins Architecture and Art Library at the University of Houston.

The 1995-96 programs of Houston Center for Photography are supported in part by the following corporations, foundations and agencies:

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## PHOTOMURALS

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## The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The museum's year-round film/video exhibition program showcases the best of independents, local premieres, revivals, and foreign films.

The museum also distributes a circulating collection of **Film and Video by Robert Frank**, comprising fifteen titles.

The award-winning video **Fire in the East: A Portrait of Robert Frank** is available for sale on VHS for \$24.95.

### The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

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A S I A

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Tseng Kwong Chi, *Disneyland, California* 1979, Gelatin silver print, 36" x 36" Collection of Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc.

**Blaffer Gallery** is located on the campus of the University of Houston,  
Entrance #16 off Cullen Boulevard.

Gallery hours: Tuesday through Friday 10:00 am through 5:00 pm  
Saturday and Sunday 1:00 pm through 5:00 pm

*This exhibition and programs are collaborative efforts of the Blaffer Gallery;*

*The Asia Society, Houston; and Houston Center for Photography.*

*Asia/America is sponsored in part by The National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.*

HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY  
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